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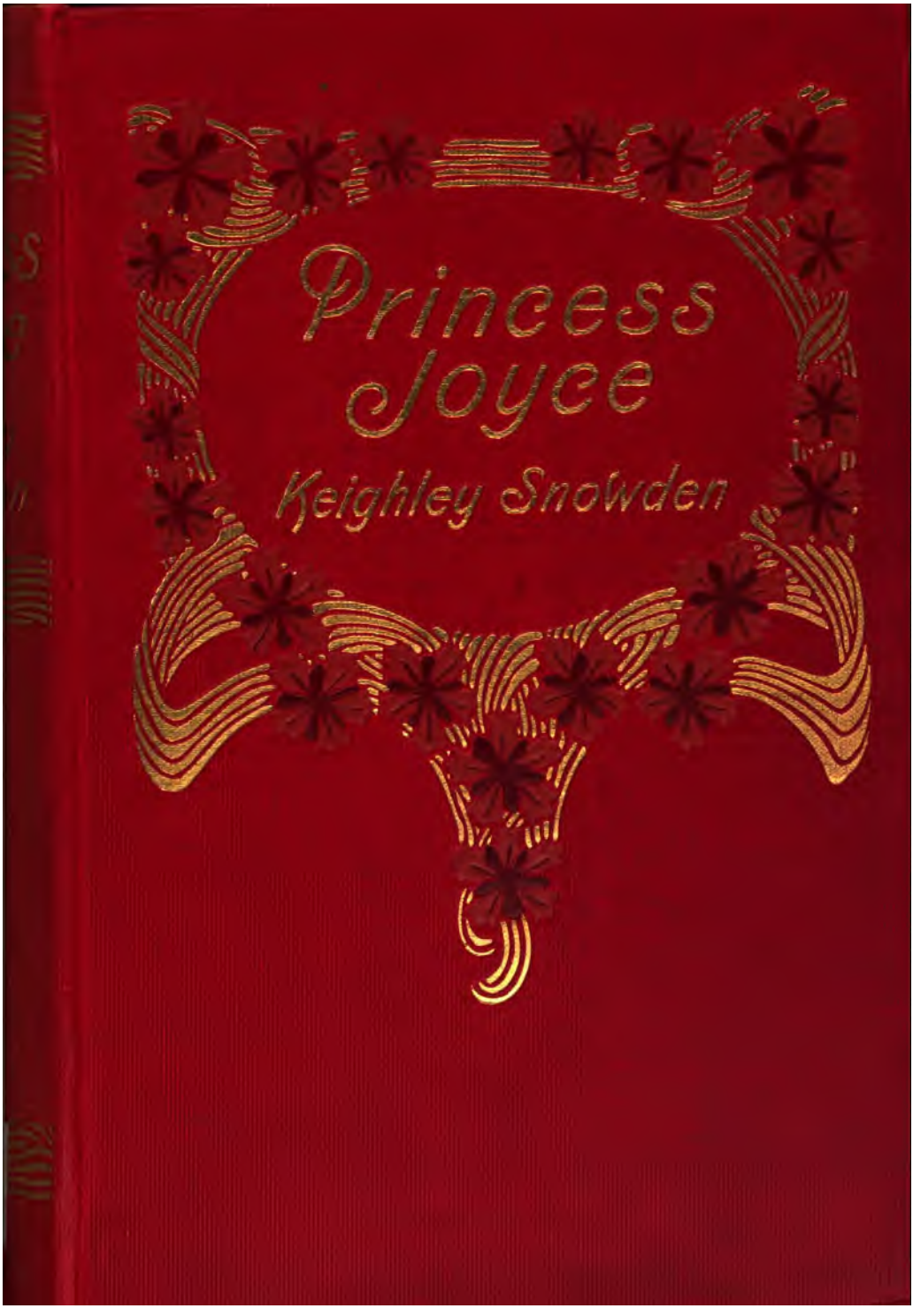
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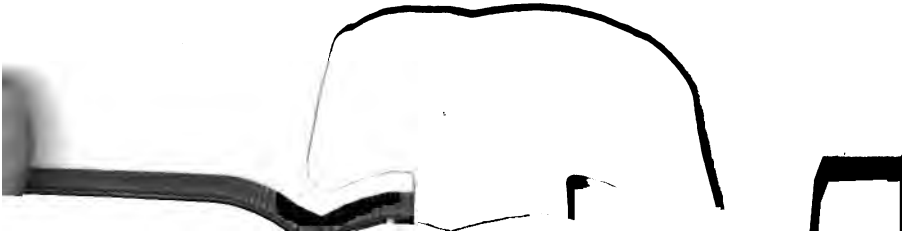

91/11

C. Evans Bevan.

PRINCESS JOYCE

Joyce at her chamber window muses

PRINCESS JOYCE

BY

KEIGHLEY SNOWDEN

Author of
"Tales of the Yorkshire Wolds," "The Web of an Old Weaver," "Barbara West," etc.

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To

Mrs. S. A. P. Kitcat,

the friend who inspired this book,

it is gratefully dedicated

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PRINCESS JOYCE

CHAPTER I

EYES AND NO EYES

BEING blind, Stephen Merrall liked to see through his daughter's eyes. She was with him now after tea, to which he had come home early from his spinning mill in the valley. "Turn the lights down, Joyce," he said. "We'll sit and look out at the window; shall we?"

She rose from his knee, smiling. Stephen took his chair up, and waited till she came to lead him by the sleeve.

"There!" said Joyce. "Now you're looking out." And she brought a buffet to sit beside him, resting an arm on one of his great thighs.

The plain stone house stood high against moors behind them. Its outlook swept that country side which the Brontës made romantic by their genius and gallant, unhappy lives. Darkness had fallen at six o'clock; but the blind man knew that the night was clear.

"Now," he said, in an even and soft bass voice, "you must tell me exactly what the dear old dale

looks like. No leavings out, you puss; and never mind the fairy tales."

He sat with both hands upon his knees, prepared to imagine; and Joyce, a charming and lovely child of fifteen, pushed a hand under one of his.

"Well," said she, "the hill goes up to the sky, you know."

"The other hill? Or the hill we're on?"

Her light laugh was very musical to his ear. "Stupid! The hill we're looking at. It goes right across the window, up among the stars . . . But, of course, it isn't solid."

"No?" He smiled, and stroked her hand, "How's that?"

"It's grey, and all full of little holes where the light shines through."

"A light inside it, then."

"Yes! . . . *I* think," said Joyce, allowing that fairy tales might not be sensible, "it's the hill the Pied Piper took all the children into."

'Ah."

"But, outside, it's very grey and dark—darker than the blue sky. It looks bigger than it does in the daylight, Dad. How's that?"

"Never mind. Perhaps it is bigger."

Joyce gave his hand a little smack. "You mustn't make fun of me, you know."

"I apologize," he said.

"Well—the lights go criss-cross, and up and down and daisy-chains. Oh, I'm sure I could never count them. But our mill lights in the bottom are like a ship."

He waited. "Pretty?"

"Oh, much, much the prettiest of all! There are one, two, three—five long rows of little lights under one another, all steady." Then, with a shade of disappointment: "But how small it looks, all in one window-pane."

"Why, so it must," said he, and put his arm about her. "Yet all the hill is built on it, little woman."

"Built on it?"

"Yes. And Grandad carried the stones." He went on jocosely, himself the teller of tales after all. "This is a mystery. They didn't *look* like stones, but just like beams with the warps on them; and a funnier thing was that he didn't bring them to the mill, but carried them clean away. He should have carried them on his back; but he had a cart, so as not to make so many journeys. Once a fortnight, Grandad travelled with full beams over the Moor to Bradford; and, the more beams he took away, the more the hill grew. So of course we have to keep on sending bobbins, for fear it should disappear, and all the lights go out."

Joyce watched her father's face in the twilight. The eyes were hidden by his dark spectacles, but she saw a smile softening the bearded cheek.

"You mean the houses grew," said she; "don't you? But, Dad, I thought it was you that built the mill."

"This one, yes—for you to tell me what it looks like. I and somebody who is dead—a good partner . . . But you haven't told me about the stars."

She thought awhile. Then she asked softly: "Did you never see it, darling?"

"Why, no, sweetheart; I never did."

"Poor old Dad!"

Stephen's hand caressed her soft abundant hair. "Lucky old Dad," said he, "while I've your eyes. They're *much* better than mine used to be."

"Oh, that can't be so! You can see so well without them."

He laughed, and drew her towards him.

"Ah, we have great times together, you and I, don't we? I see what you see, and we both see ever so much that other people wouldn't. Great times! What shall I do, Joyce, when my little second sweetheart grows to be a woman, eh?—and runs away, of course, with somebody else?"

He spoke playfully, but she sat more stiffly under his arm. "I wish you wouldn't say such things,"

" Did you never see it, darling ? " she asked softly

she pouted; and he heard the resentment in her voice with a little thrill of pleasure.

"Very well. Then you'll stay, and talk to nobody but me? Eh? Talk, and read, and sing sometimes, and take me out walks, and make your mother at last quite jealous."

"Mother won't be jealous."

He laughed again, quietly. "Well, well," said he, "I mustn't tease you—go on about the stars, dearie."

But she could not do so quite at once.

Without asking why, the blind man stooped aside and raised her to his knee. Less tender he could not be with her, yet blamed his tenderness for her too tender sensibility.

"Rain drops?" he said lightly.

Joyce thought she hid them on his shoulder, and a sound escaped her that was half a sob, half a laugh. "No, it's because I'm happy," she protested.

Grief was quick in her, but so was joy. He kissed her smooth forehead. God grant, he prayed with a strange misgiving, she might be happy always!

CHAPTER II

THE RIGHT-HAND MAN

LOUIS KNIGHT came in without knocking. He was free of the house. "In the gloaming?" they heard him say pleasantly.

"Blind man's holiday," said Stephen.

Louis was his manager and secretary, a second self almost: slim, clean-shaven, diffident, refined, a young man to be so responsibly occupied, but worthy of the trust. Merrall himself, twenty years his senior at five-and-forty, was hardly steadier-minded. There was unusual kindness and esteem between them, amounting to warm friendship in both. Cultured men, they conversed about all things under the sun and above the sun; and it needed only a hint from the worsted spinner to procure the company of this right-hand man at any hour of the twenty-four.

"Shall I turn the lights up?" said Louis.

"Do."

Joyce did not move; and he smiled at the pleasant picture they made there.

"We're going on till ten," he reported. "But all's

well forward. . . I've brought your lecture." He had a roll of typewritten manuscript in his hand. "Would you like me to read it over again?"

"No, you needn't do that. Grace is going to run through it to-morrow, before I start for Aireley."

"Right," said Louis. "I'm putting it on the mantelshelf. . . Do you want me at all?"

"Oh, sit down and have some tea." Stephen's tone was an affectionate protest. "Joyce, ask Betty to brew some, and see if there's plenty left to eat. Unless you mean to be off, Louis?"

"Why, no, I'm hungry."

Joyce tripped out with the teapot, and Louis made her a humorous bow. But a shade of anxiety sobered him as Stephen rose.

"Are you sleeping better?" he asked.

"I slept *well* last night. Yesterday Joyce took me up to the hill-top, where I could smell wet heather. When I'm tired," said the blind man heartily, "I sleep according to custom."

The table was left as they had risen from it half an hour before; and, after giving a hand with his friend's chair, to set it by the fireside, Louis began to eat without ceremony. They talked business. For a moment Joyce showed her bright face again, just to say, "I'm going to my lessons, Dad;" then Betty brought the tea.

Imagine a brisk little woman of fifty, with quick light eyes, and a pleasant eagerness to know one's needs and meanings. Her coming made a diversion.

"Ah, Betty!" cried Louis. "I'll be bound Mr. Merrall hasn't told you what a poor dinner he had."

He spoke, as much as anything, for the mischievous satisfaction of seeing her throw her hands up.

"Nonsense! Take no notice of him, Betty! I did extremely well," said Stephen noisily.

"Eh, dear!" she gasped. "I clean forgat puddin'! Now, then!"

But, after tea, the two men's converse took a serious turn at Stephen's instance.

"I've a proposal to make," he said, when they were comfortably seated. "It concerns your position, Louis."

He spoke in his ordinary voice of quiet cheerfulness, but the young man turned his head quickly.

"Now, don't be alarmed," he warned. "I see you drawing your horns in, and I think I know what you'll try to say. But I'm not going to take your answer to-night, so possess yourself. Let's go back a bit."

"Well?"

"I remember your father very well."

His heart beating a little faster, Louis Knight sat with conjectures chasing each other out of his head.

"He was the best weaver my father had in the

hand-loom days. There was a tale my father liked to tell, of a piece that *your* father undertook to finish in three days, to be in time for the fortnightly delivery. He worked night and day. On the Friday night about eleven, my father sent him home to get some sleep; he was to return at six and do three hours' work that remained. At twelve o'clock my father was knocked up, and put his head out of the bedroom window. 'Who's that?' 'It's me, Tom. I want th' key.' 'Do yo' know what o'clock 'tis?' said my father. 'Nay,' says Harry Knight, 'but I judge it's goin' on for six.' That was the way the old hand-loom weavers broke themselves; but your father was the strongest of them all. His head could hardly have touched the pillow, you see; in those days he had neither clock nor watch."

Louis's eyes were moist. He made an inarticulate sound.

"That was the Corn Law time, and work wasn't always to be had, so many banks had broken. I never knew how my father won through the early forties. I don't think he knew, quite. But your father helped him rarely, and that was why I took you into the office, Louis."

"For which," the young man interrupted, speaking gravely, "I shall be always grateful."

"Of course I felt pretty sure I was doing a wise

thing. I made inquiries about you—oh, plenty, you may take my word for it. You'd taught yourself shorthand, and French and German, and read a good deal, at an age when lads like to be out and about. Well, I did better than I knew. I did so well that I'm ashamed of myself."

He sat with his head thrown back, as though he looked under the spectacles. Louis's eyes sank, and his handsome face was flushed.

"I'm going to get as near level as a blind man can. Louis, I want you to accept a partnership."

After all, the offer staggered him. He grew a little pale. "Do you call that getting level?" he asked presently.

"I didn't say so."

"Because, to my mind, it's not an equitable thing. If I accepted, I—well, I should be taking advantage of your affliction." There was a tremor in his voice, not imperceptible to that quick ear.

"That's like your modesty, Louis," Merrall answered gently, "as well as very kind. But I have to consider what you do. I took you as a clerk, and £3 a week is a clerk's pay. Don't interrupt. A senior clerk's then; bother you! There isn't a technical detail you don't understand, and you practically run the mill. You know very well, or you should know,

that I couldn't replace you in that respect for less than £350 a year, if I were whole and sound."

"Ah, but you'd do the work yourself."

"There you're mistaken. I'm not so keen, Louis." He made a pause, aware that he had scored, and secretly happy in the confidence that he should impose his will. "Very well. You take that back, as you don't say anything. But the inside managing isn't all. You've as good a head for business as I have myself, and so last summer I was able to take the first holiday I'd had in four years, since my partner died. My dear Louis, what I have to do is to apologize for not having thought of this before; but you know my easy-going habits. It occurred to me yesterday in quite a startling way; I remembered my transgression, and since then my sin has been ever before me." He laughed.

"I wish you hadn't thought of it," said Louis with a downcast manner. "You'll be hurt when I say how I feel about it, Stephen."

"Tell me your mind, then."

The young man sat looking at the fire. "Why, it's this," he said. "I shouldn't have ever come into the mill but for your need of somebody who could write shorthand, and be eyes and hands for you. You're so kind, you make too much of that. I'm perfectly content. How could I be happier, seeing the way you

treat me as a friend, and the —— ?" He broke off, but he resumed with animation. "It's enough for me to be so thick with Stephen Merrall. If you knew what I think about you, and what other folks think, you'd see me walking six inches taller than my size." He laughed in his turn, nervously.

"Now, Louis!" said Merrall, with a touch of dialect. "There's a name for that sort o' talk."

"When it isn't meant, yes."

"Well, has it ought to do with what's fair?"

"But you're more than fair. Friendship's a better thing."

"What! A friendship that makes use of a man?"

"You're welcome to make use of *me*."

"But you won't be guilty of such work yourself. . . Nay, Louis!"

"Because you're handicapped."

The quick rally brought them to a stand. For the first time, the blind man admitted some discouragement.

"Do you see," he said, tranquilly, "what that amounts to, Louis? I'm blind, so I'm not to be just. It puts me under an obligation I mustn't discharge. That's hardly 'jannock.'"

"No; I think it makes you too generously conscious of ordinary help," said Louis firmly.

"Your help is not ordinary. The fact is, I monopolize your life. This lecture, all my private affairs—"

Louis interrupted him with a quiet laugh. "That's what I said, Stephen. You ask me to take advantage, you see. Let me do something for friendship. I'll take the £350 if that'll relieve your mind at all, though I shall always think it more than I'm earning. But a partnership—well, for one thing, I duff at the responsibility. I—" He ceased in some confusion. That was part of the truth, and yet he felt it to be a mean part, and the smallest.

Stephen Merrall sighed; and what he thought Louis had to wonder afterwards.

"Well," he said cheerfully, "so be it. I'll give you best. But thou'rt a twined 'un, Louis. My father would have said so."

CHAPTER III

AUNT SELINAH

BETTY put her head round the door, and said in a mysterious whisper that Selinah Merrall was in the house. Louis, who was smiling at his friend's remonstrance—a 'twined 'un,' being a tree grown intractably —looked instantly uneasy. He had no other occasion to feel so than shyness of a very outspoken lady; but Stephen understood the effect his sister made.

"Well," said he, "you'd better be off, then. You like your mother's company for choice, I know."

Louis rose. "I've news for her to-night," he answered. "She'll not know how to be happy enough. . . . Nor I don't. I haven't said a word of thanks, and I can't, Stephen."

"Don't try." The blind man stood before him tall and broad, to hold a cordial hand out. "Actions talk better than words; you're eloquent already. Good-night, Louis, and God bless you."

"Good-night."

They kept the grasp a long moment, and separated. Left alone, Stephen stood listening with a smile to his

leave-takings in the hall. Then he went to the room door, and called to the portentous visitor; whom you are to see because our story tells how, some years later, she turned things topsy-turvy.

"Do you want me, Selinah?"

"I do that," a reedy voice cried back, and at once she appeared in the passage—"a tall, meagre, barge-pole of a woman," not "wrapped up in wimples of calico," like Jean Paul Richter's aversion, but wearing a red shawl held close about her. She was a maiden sister, three years Merrall's senior. "You're so throng with business, Stephen, that I never get a sight of you," she said; and kissed his cheek. "I want some money off you."

"What is it this time?" he gaily asked.

"Heathen," said Aunt Selinah, contemptuously.

While she bustled past him and sat bolt down on an armless chair, he stood with his hand on the open door. "Coming, mother?" said he. But Mrs. Merrall's pleasant voice replied that she had her hands in mincemeat.

"Why I go about collecting for black and yellow people," said Aunt Selinah rapidly, "I don't know; and my two feet are like stones in a graveyard. I said last year I wouldn't do it, but I'm soft. Don't subscribe, unless you like. I read in the paper they're healthier without any clothes on, and I'm sure I don't care if

they like to walk about so. I wouldn't, but that's the way I was brought up; and it's warmer there, I've no doubt at all. I think they're very well off. What worries me a good deal more is the horrible tales one sees every day about this Christian country. Why don't the Japanese, or somebody, send missionaries here?"

It was certainly a defective sense of humour that made Louis Knight avoid this entertaining person.

"Last year you gave me £50," she ran on. "Of course you do as you like. Any one can get round *you* with a tale, and I wash my hands of it. I supposed you gave it to please Joyce; it would be like you; but if you think it does the Chinese any good to have a continual supply of Christian martyrs, I'll take your money. You spoil that child. She'll find it out, one of these days. I know it's no use talking. If you don't mind, Stephen, I'll put some coal on the fire." She was doing so as she spoke, and he did not affect to have a say in the matter. His sister's bark was so much worse than her bite that it might be taken as playful.

"Very well, Selinah, I'll give you another fifty," he said.

"So long as you don't expect me to thank you, all right," said she. "*I* don't run the chapel. You men run it. I'm trimming a cradle, and that's all I

am doing. Some other woman'll pay twice as much as it's worth for it, and think she's spent the money on her baby. I don't buy at bazaars. Dumped things are good enough for me. There's always a shopkeeper on the committee: no, you mustn't sell cheap, or you'll injure trade. If I pay three guineas for a thirty-shilling cradle, I've thirty-three shillings less to spend in shops than I ought to have."

She fidgeted. "Stephen, I wonder you don't have the table cleared! Of course you can't see it, but, really,—it seems to me you sit there as you do among your pigeons, waiting for something to happen. I couldn't live like that. My grey curls wouldn't survive it."

"I trust you'll never pull them out, Selinah."

"I'd pull somebody else's out, if necessary. But you're so placid, Stephen; like a big schoolboy after stuffing himself. It isn't the blindness; you were always so. All the family energy's in me. So, if you don't mind, I'll ring for Betty."

On the word "mind" she had twitched the bell-pull.

"It's your kindness, I daresay—I'm kind myself, at least I hope so; but if one is to have any comfort in this world it's necessary to fight for it."

Betty appeared, with an open mouth.

"Aren't you going to take away the tea-things?" asked Miss Merrall tartly.

"If yo're wantin' t' table ——"

"Yes, please," Merrall interposed steadily. "Clear it, Betty."

"Now then, then."

She went for her tray—a scene was averted. "Don't worry the good old soul," he pleaded.

"I worry nobody. I can't be worried, that's all—if you don't mind. How *good* people are is neither here nor there. They should do their duty. I'll call round for the cheque," said Aunt Selinah, pulling the shawl about her head, "some time next week; I must be off."

Betty just then came in again; the table was not wanted, after all.

"Don't glower," the prickly old lady said to her, and stepped to the door.

"If I look as foul as ye," said Betty with great freedom and spirit, "I'm not so fain on't."

"Nor need you be," snapped Aunt Selinah. "Good-night, Stephen. Grace, I'm off. You can send me a dozen of those pies."

"I won't forget you," Mrs. Merrall answered; but the words were trapped in the door, as Aunt Selinah shut it.

CHAPTER IV

THE PRINCESS

ONE regretted that Stephen could not see how beautiful his child was. His sensitive fingers were indeed passed over her face sometimes; but the sense of touch, however delicate, knows nothing of colour and radiance, and has not sight's entirety and perfect apprehension.

Joyce's was a flower-like loveliness quite rare; one thought of wild roses. The candour of her happy look resembled them, recalled their fragrance; an effect not merely due to purity of complexion, or to the daintiness of the face's mould. Her fall of rippling hair was a golden glory of childhood. This beauty her father had, as well as he could, to imagine —and how she moved, a straight and slender fairy princess. But she looked no sweeter than she was to him, after all; charmingly frank and sunny she was, and his playmate, to beguile the hours of weariness.

It was, however, Joyce who had caused his blindness though she did not know it. He owed that dawnless night of fourteen years to a simple accident. He was

in bed; and his child, playing upon the pillow beside him, dropped a watch on one of his eyes.

Only those of his own household knew the story; for, as soon as the probable loss of sight was diagnosed, he gave orders (with rare forethought and tenderness) that part of the truth should be suppressed. "The watch fell:" it was supposed to have been hanging above his head. He did not think blindness too great a price to pay for her; and it was inevitable that he should love her the more tenderly because of it. Not only the sense of willing sacrifice brought this about; their intimacy did so. A very gentle mother sometimes lives as he did in a daughter's mind: a father in the rarest cases.

She had been charming at every stage of growth; and every stage he remembered minutely.

He had stories of the past to tease her with. There was one about an apple pasty, which she found cut up in slices on the table and ate to the last crumb. She was well shaken—by the scandalized Betty. "Who took the apple pasty?" he asked next day on hearing of it. "Babby took appa pasty, *an' c'y*," said she. Faults atoned for should be forgotten!

Another tale she did not mind so much. She had used a clean towel to mop the floor with, and Betty scolded, much annoyed. "What d'yo' mean?" she

demanded; "what d'yo' mean?" Joyce reproached her. "No coss, Betty. No coss. Betty be a good girl an' Babby be a good girl."

Bargainer, he called her. Bed was not so much bed as a means to an end. "Babby go to bed," she used to say, "an' get up morning—an' have nice *tea*."

Her dolls were his dolls too, and so were all her whims and fancies his. He and she between them made up more fairy tales than the Brothers Grimm and Hans Andersen and Mr. Lang. They peopled and built the country-side with them, as well as the night-sky. As she grew, her gift of skill for the description of what she really saw began to surprise him, and he developed it: she was eyes to him in a way that revived all memories of Nature.

School did not hackney her. He took sane care that it should not, making an easy sport of the home-work, softening crude impressions, helping her not to take the discipline too seriously, gilding all with humour.

Aunt Selinah disapproved. Joyce might keep at the top of her class, but she would be spoiled beyond all sense and reason, said that drastic lady. She obeyed, yes; Stephen did have the *nous* to teach her obedience, as soon as she could talk; but her manners were much too young and her mind too old. If she didn't have to put up with a little roughness now

—as a girl herself Aunt Selinah had been birched—she would find life pretty hard some day; and imagine a child brought up without any secrets—except a quite unnecessary one—from the first day when she began to ask her little questions! Where would her modesty be? In point of fact, Joyce's maiden aunt carried a feud in her bosom. On all subjects else she had her way, but Joyce was taboo.

Except for a passing shot sometimes! Even the lively recollection of Stephen's threat that if she scared the child he would not see her—she did stay away for one dreadful eighteen months, but thought it a Christian duty to forgive—even that could not wholly silence Aunt Selinah. In Joyce's presence she might be dumb; he, not she, was responsible for the girl's upbringing; but she let him know, as occasion served, that she kept her own opinion.

Joyce was not too much aware of her. She had eyes for no one but her father. Aunt Selinah was odd, and amused her, but could not make her feel constraint.

Her girl-friends were but two or three, and she almost forgot them when school was over. This was unfortunate. But besides her father she had one intimate—an old dog.

She had fed him when young with joints from the pantry; now he followed her everywhere. Being a

shaggy and unkempt mongrel with a grizzled beard, he was fittingly called Rags; yet, essentially, he was a gentleman. When he left her at the school gate he jumped up to give her his dog's equivalent of a kiss. If he growled at some one and was scolded, he signified repentance in the same way promptly. If he put a bird up he apologized with a humble tail. They understood each other perfectly.

"What has Rags had to say to-day?" was one of her father's regular questions.

She reported once: "He was sweet. I bought him an Eccles cake, and oh, Dad, he didn't like it! But he wanted me to *think* he did; so he carried it in his mouth and kept behind me, meaning to hide it somewhere. Of course I pretended; we do pretend, but he doesn't know when *I* do; and he left it right by a doorstep. Rags isn't clever, you know—not that way. I really saw him drop it. Then—oh, it was funny!—another dog came and Rags swallowed the whole cake. You should just see how sick he looks; I have to laugh every time he tries to wag his poor old tail. It was rather a shame, Dad, but I don't think he can be really sick, do you?"

About the time when our story begins, Stephen Merrall had imposed a self-denying ordinance. It was not Aunt Selinah's views, but his wife's, that pointed out the wisdom of so doing. Joyce must learn some

housework, though this cut short their special intercourse.

Do you know the Yorkshire housewife? She gives her life to the business, as our grandmothers did. Her modest civilisation is one of creature comforts, "house pride," and self-sacrifice. Of art, or literature, she knows too often little; but her thoughts may still be charitable and her taste alert. Her taste is often her crudest virtue, true. Joyce was to effect a great and wonderful change in Mrs. Merrall's. But you could find no fault with Mrs. Merrall's cakes and pies and puddings, or—*pace* the tea-things of the last chapter—with her fine good order and cleanliness. She was her own plain dressmaker, milliner and upholsterer. Though Stephen was making quite £2,000 a year, she ran Wake House with one old general servant, assisted by a small girl who came to help in the mornings, and by a washerwoman. Her wash-days and baking days made no confusion; she had a time-table and a programme in her head for every hour of the week. Joyce now served an apprenticeship.

So Stephen Merrall possessed his soul in patience, and admired.

CHAPTER V

DOVES

To meet the blind manufacturer was to like him from the first words he uttered. He spoke with an unconscious pleasant dignity, a cultured simplicity, in which you heard the kind strength of his heart. Like Milton's eyes, his disposition "suffered no perceptible alteration from his blindness."

He was formerly a man of many activities, prized and admired for the public work he did. A musician, and fond of children, he trained quite a remarkable chorus in connection with the Sunday school; and once a year this chorus gave a concert of pretty part-songs, which at that time was unique of its kind. It was largely Stephen Merrall who brought what is called the action song to the stage of development known later. He trained his little folk to produce effects for the eye as pleasing as their music was to the ear —either with simple gestures, or with coloured fans and sashes. What a patient deal of rehearsing these performances required you may guess; but the youngsters loved it; and, to satisfy all hearers whom the

fame of his conductorship brought from the country sides into Aireley, itself a town of many inhabitants with musical taste, he found it necessary after a few years to repeat each concert three or four times. The little accident of a baby's play was a public calamity.

But, when it happened, he at any rate realized for the first time how many people loved him. A host of friends came to sit with him of an evening. He lost touch of none of his interests. He was in closer touch with other men's hearts.

For recreations, he had still his violin, and a piano. His wife read to him, took him to lectures and public meetings where he spoke as usual, lent him her arm in summer evening walks. He had chosen her in a workman's home, and she had little of his bookish culture; but she had sensibility, a natural refinement, which enabled her to share his thoughts and pleasures.

Then, as you must have partly seen, he found pleasures which are peculiar to blindness, and help to compensate it.

One Saturday afternoon of summer—the first summer of Joyce's home apprenticeship—he sought her as he passed out to sit in the garden. "I'm going to call on the pigeons," he announced cheerily. "Can you spare Joyce, or is there over-much to do?"

In the spacious kitchen, its windows open to sweet

air, they were making jam. Joyce's part just then was to write the labels.

"Off you go!" said Mrs. Merrall. "So long as you get them done before tea, we shall be straight." And he felt Joyce's fingers slipped within his arm with a quick little pressure.

The mother's fond glance followed them over the lawn, he very upright, with an easy and confident slow carriage, his cap tilted forward; she pressing up to him as she laughed, watching his face—a tall slip of a girl growing out of her frock, but "right bonnie." Their happy voices came in snatches. It seemed a pity they could not always be together. Grace Merrall smiled, forgetting to stir the pan; and when they disappeared behind the rose-bower, her eyes were moist.

The dove-cot stood in a clear space among fruit-trees.

As they entered the orchard, he felt the cool shadows and the sun alternately, listened for the fine hum of insect life there, and heard the low cooing of the male birds enhance the silver-brightness of his daughter's voice. There came a silken beat of wings; a pigeon alighted on his shoulder, another clung at his breast, the whole flight circled about them with a commotion of fanned air, and, settling rapidly, became a surprising burden though they fluttered. Joyce laughed

joyously—their feet were in her hair, and on her outstretched arms thinly clad with muslin; and they looked so self-possessed and saucy.

"Oh, Dad, there are too many!"

She threw them off, to guide him to the rustic seat; and some went strutting on before them, others still flew down. Stephen held his hands palm upwards, feeling the birds jostle each other off and on. His pale face was radiant. Sitting down, he took handfuls of wheat from his coat pockets, and instead of strewing it on the grass let them take it from him.

Philosopher as he was, what struck him with peculiar force, when playing with his birds, was the marvellousness of life—that is to say of individual creatures, each conscious, separate, and able to do things of its own motive.

The flock of pigeons came to him out of the darkness more vividly than any casual sound of human voices, heard when he did not know who spoke. They touched him, made free with him, and had two wonderful powers that were denied to him, flight and vision. In proportion as he realized the miracle, he was delighted by their familiarity and the act of feeding them. Joyce had pet names for them, so that he knew which bird was scattering the grains from his hand, which drove it away, which were too shy to come nearer than his feet, which had specially

beautiful feathers. With this guidance from her, he could take hold of one or other of the tamest and put a grain between his lips for it, or between hers. She called it kissing them.

An old man with a pair of garden shears in his hand came part way towards them from the orchard hedge, and stood admiring. When the play was ended, he approached: a genial old soul with heavy shoulders and a fringe of grey beard.

"I've a sovereign for yo', Merrall," said he.

The blind man turned his head, not quite sure at first of the direction from which the voice proceeded. "How's that, Ezra?" he asked.

"For a bird 'at young George Marlowe shot."

"Shot!"

"Ea," he calmly answered. "It's a carrier, an owd cock. He shot it this mornin'."

"Oh," cried Joyce, "how could he do such a thing!"

"Why, for cleverness," the old man explained; "an' a longish shot it wor. I think, happen, he niver thought o' doin't fully; but he said he could. He'd done't afore I could shout, howiver. So then he flang me this brass down."

Joyce's blue eyes had tears of indignation and wonder in them. Why should George Marlowe be so

unkind? He always smiled at her; she had suspected him even of sending a certain valentine.

"Flang 't down like nowght at all! . . . Ye say nowght, Merrall; but what a lad like that wants wi' a gun, I cannot tell. Blawin' off at carrier pigeons! This hed a message fro' Harper's."

A friend being ill at a distant moorside farm, some birds had been sent there to serve for errands to the doctor.

"Did you hear how Harper was?" Stephen asked.

"Varra badly. . . . I gav' him a piece o' my mind, young harlequin. Here—ho'd your hand out."

To the old man's embarrassment his master rose, disregarding this. "Nay," said he, "you're over honest, Ezra. It was meant for you, I fancy."

"Ea, 'twor! But I sammed it up for ye, an' said so."

"Never mind." He began to move quietly toward the house. "Put it in your pocket, for luck," said he.

Ezra looked at the coin, his weather-beaten face a picture of disrelish and dismay. "Nowght o' t' soart!" he cried. "I took too mich impidence wi't. . . . Here, Joyce."

"I don't want it," said Joyce, "thank you very much, Ezra." And she took her father's hand.

"Why, then," said the old man, half shouting after him, "I'll send it back."

"Do, if you will—with my compliments. But I don't see why he shouldn't pay for his sport."

Joyce's mind was all bewilderment. "Dad, you don't *say* anything," she faltered, presently.

He pressed her hand; calm though he was, she appealed to his true feeling, one of positive pain. Indignation at the taking of a life that was dear to them—at the fact, indeed, of any life being taken lightly—burned in his heart; but the boy's act was nothing strange, or, if it was strange in a sense, nothing at all uncommon.

"I fancy Ezra provoked him," he explained. "You see, they were talking about the gun; perhaps Ezra chaffed his shooting. Of course, dearie, he didn't know it was our bird; he wouldn't stop to think, would he?"

"But why do boys kill things?" she flamed. "I think it is cruel! Cruel!"

"Yes, dearie."

He was proud of her, and curiously touched. When he had mollified opinion in the kitchen, the little tragedy still troubled him. He sat revolving it.

CHAPTER VI

GEORGE MARLOWE

GEORGE MARLOWE, being sixteen and susceptible to beauty, had sent the valentine that Joyce thought might be his.

It was one of those old-fashioned valentines with paper lace about a pink scent-packet, inscribed with verses and a pierced heart. She considered it very pretty, and kept it in a drawer in her bedroom with other treasures. The valentine had not set her heart aflame; still, there was nobody else who smiled in just the shy way he did, and she had taken an interest in him. When first they met after it, she had blushed a little too.

Be sure this was acknowledgment and reward enough. Master Marlowe's heart beat faster.

"How it comes let lovers tell," she was now his "sweetheart;" and, to speak to her, he would have done anything possible to a rather coarse lad's awkwardness. The sad thing was that no way of getting a word with the princess occurred to him. That is to say, none that looked well—girls don't

come out if you whistle for them, and it is silly to hang about. Indeed he was ashamed of waylaying her always in the Saturday afternoon walks with her father. He felt so beastly sheepish afterwards; she took less notice than he had hoped she would.

Should he send her something else? He would have liked to send a ring, but it risked such awful things. Her father would want to know, and there might be all sorts of fuss and nonsense, not private between themselves.

Sweethearting was private as a matter of course. Nobody talked about it, except as a darkly secret matter, or to make fun of somebody. If he had had the least idea that Joyce did not think of it like that and never could—imagine the chill!

However, just when the brilliant idea had occurred to him of slipping a note into her hand as she passed with her father, he had the frightful luck to shoot her pigeon. He stood in consternation while old Ezra abused him.

"Yo' young wastrel!" cried the accuser. "What mak' o' sport do yo' call that? Will yo' shooit messenger-birds? . . . I s'll hev a nice tale to tell."

"Don't talk to me like that," said George, recovering. "What's it worth?"

"Worth? It's worth hauf-a-sov'reign!"

Then he threw the sovereign down. "There!"

said he. "Don't make a fuss about it." And walked away penniless but manlike.

What came of it was that Joyce's first love-letter proved rather a prosaic one. George met her alone as she came from school, raised his blue and red cap, stopped, offered the missive awkwardly, blurted out, "I mean it, Miss Merrall!" and got away.

The boy, this effort covered with confusion; her it excited, and a little flattered; she had never before been called "Miss Merrall." So she opened his twisted note and read this scrawl:

"Dear Miss Merrall I am sorry I shot the pigeon, I would not have shot anything in the world of yours to save my life, forgive me, your Friend,

"GEORGE MARLOWE."

It was not even so eloquent as he felt it. But it wiped away the offence, because Joyce forgave readily; and it broke the ice between them.

"Grace," her father said, downstairs, "we're getting on. Joyce has an admirer."

Her mother scanned his face. "Do you mean——? Nonsense, Stephen!"

"Why didn't he send the note to me, do you think?"

"I hope you're wrong," she said quite gravely. "He comes of a very rough stock, and his father spoils him."

It wiped away the offence, because Joyce forgave readily

Stephen laughed. "Fear nothing. Our Joyce is fancy-free, so far; I'm joking, Grace."

"Oh, she's a child. But then!"

A child she was, and older in years than feeling. The admirer, too, was soon packed off to Leeds, to season himself in a chemical works; but three years later Grace recalled that snatch of conversation. Meanwhile Joyce forgot her valentine. When, one day, she saw it again by chance, it went the way of other rubbish.

By that time, you will understand, the princess was a practical minor housewife.

CHAPTER VII

A WORM I' THE BUD

JOYCE had passed her eighteenth birthday, and still was fancy-free. But who shall tell her fancies? Lighter than summer clouds, and flitting shapeless, they peopled quiet hours. In her look, one saw them mirrored.

> Such a look will tell that the violets are peeping,
> Coming the rose: and, unaware, a cry
> Springs in her bosom for odours and for colour,
> Covert and the nightingale; she knows not why.

Louis Knight's desire of her dawned at the first putting up of her hair. He watched her with a new interest; and she wove a spell with every graceful movement, plain word, and pleasant glance. He, too, was "unaware."

Knowledge of it came to him at the mill one day, in the simple situation that she stood with some companions near a spinning-frame in motion—in no danger, but so thoughtlessly happy that he warned her. As she thanked him, he saw her beauty like a dazzling light; and so trembled, at the peril his imagination conjured up, that presently he left the

party. The very possibility of peril had been unreal, or at least inconsiderable, for there were guards. This he told himself. But just because the occasion was so slight, he could not mistake the nature of his emotion.

No joy made it pleasant to him, once out of sight of her. He worshipped with a very distant reverence, an instant apprehension of trouble. He retreated to the office, where Stephen sat. Of all men living, it seemed to Louis presently that none could have a much worse right than he to pretend to the character of her lover.

Five minutes later she came gaily, demanding his escort to the engine-room; and, as he turned to go with her, she asked—surprising him—if he was unwell. He found some reply, which seemed to admit that he might be so and made light of it. Her concern was very sweet, however.

Louis did not go across to the house that night. The being unwell was his excuse. But neither did he sit as usual with his mother.

It was an August evening. The moor on his own side of the valley attracted him, and there, among quiet heights, he found a place to think in. He was alone with the waste. Grouse bragged all about him under a clear sundown, and a fresh wind stirred the ling. He sat down with an extraordinary sense of fatigue.

Louis had to look at his position as the confidential servant of a patron who had "made" him, and whom he could not in any sense betray. He had not the smallest reason to be squeamish; but he did not forget, and never could forget, the poor estate from which the blind man's liberal trust had raised him. What he wished to be clear upon was not the question whether he might aspire to his benefactor's daughter. Modesty kept the thought of marriage from his mind. It was the question whether he could now continue to be that benefactor's habitual guest, with such a secret in his bosom. Loyalty bade him stifle and quite expel it, while Love said confidently, "You shall be for ever unhappy." He was no unpractised ruler of his own spirit; but all the strength of his will in a full-breathed effort did not serve to turn out Love.

He rose imagining the door shut: his traitor eyes took in the sunset's charm religiously, and Love was back by the window! Back and pleading hard.

Why should he so deny himself? What harm in worshipping, since God had made her so? To harden his heart and she so beautiful—was it not a kind of profanity? Why, she was something very pure; worship appeared to his mind's mood a high duty. What forbade it, then?

He recanted with an infinitely light heart.

Reverence what was fair in her he must, and ever would, while life remained in him.

And see her often? Somehow, still, a sensitive conscience winced.

But what was bound to happen happened. He went to the house as afore-time for friendship's sake, and felt on wretched terms with himself as a double dealer. Next evening, he met her glance of solicitude with dropped eyes.

"Are you better?" she asked. "We're out on the lawn, Louis. I heard the gate, so I ran to tell you."

His "Oh, yes, it was nothing," she took with a pleasant nod as she spoke; but continued, he thought, to scrutinise him.

In hiding his own feelings, Louis, however, was marvellously successful—he scarcely said a word for an hour on anything she talked about. His manner was so indifferent that Joyce felt vaguely hurt, as if he set her back as a child again. There was only a ten years' gap between their ages, but to a girl of eighteen that may seem a generation. When the lover is grave (and undeclared), it always does so.

That was the real bar to Louis Knight's happiness; as a suitor he would soon have felt it. For, a girl left out by older men—unless she be conceited, and a precocious flirt—is not provoked to appear as old as they are, but goes her own brave way. She leaves them out

on her side too. Joyce was hurt, but not too deeply, and only hurt because he disappointed her. He had been very nice. It had seemed just the other way between them; he made her feel that he thought her quite grown up and wise.

Joyce liked him. After her father, he was the only man she much admired. She had taken, indeed, her father's view of him. Sometimes she wondered, in her private mind, why Louis had no one whom he loved. Her notion was that he never had time to think of it; and that seemed a pity.

So, liking him, she felt no pique, and her eyes met his, as always, without self-consciousness. Her mother was seeing to supper; her father left them for a minute or two; and she spoke to him pleasantly.

"I think you're like me, Louis; you're annoyed at not being well always. Aren't you? I mean—when I can't do what I want to do."

She lay back in a canvas camp-chair, her woman-like hands in her lap, the palms upward. Again he saw her in a radiant mist. She was wearing a very simple white gown of muslin; they sat in the glow of late sunlight; and he heard the air full of quiet bird-talk, as if in a pause of expectation.

"Not annoyed," he said. "But helpless—yes. One wants to do too much sometimes."

"Father says you always do."

"Ah, for him! Nobody could, I think."

"No! Could they?"

The sweet meaning greyed her face's brightness. He thought her like an angel when she looked so.

Neither broke the musical silence for a time; then she said quietly, "I shall never leave him," and the young man's heart gave a leap—homage, and the thought that he should not lose her. Happiness welled through him. In the orchard, a blackbird's mellow pipe was the bold and inward cry of it.

"Nor I," he answered, his voice more resonant than usual. "It is too rare a thing to have known him.—And you," he would have said devoutly: but that addition was forbidden.

"I knew you thought so," she smiled.

He asked her how she knew.

"When you speak to him I can hear. You feel as I do, nearly. Isn't he brave and patient?"

"None like him."

It was "the hour of sisterly sweet hand-in-hand;" they sat in great content together. His troubled mood forgotten, he saw her beauty now with clear eyes, as one admires a flower.

And he found it exquisite. A sleeping pleasantness that never left her face, a smiling dawn, had shaped the cheeks' soft fall to the vivid, sensitive mouth, sweet in repose with slightly parted lips. Her

grey blue eyes were wistful then; one saw deep into them; and the brows' fine pencilling was boldly arched, and gave to the eyes' romantic search some strength of sober meaning. They promised sympathy and pity; yet did so as if she mused upon the joy there is in being kind. At a word this joy illumined her, as though it were always felt. It gave her the pure and dainty colour that deepened in quick flushes, and one would have said that it shone from her clear pearl brow.

A face so sweet and impressionable is rarely stamped so firmly. The extreme delicacy, the look of fine culture in its modelling, went with strong features; the nose was high; the face's oval broadened to the ears and temples, and swept to a boldly rounded chin. The brow rose sheer, the hair like a chaplet about it.

"I wish I hadn't grown up," she said. "I was much more to Dad at one time than I am, though he won't let me say so."

"How can you know that?" said Louis quickly. "We aren't able to tell. Don't you think those people who are liked best know least about it, except the being happy? . . . You are always happy, you know."

"I'm very happy. It makes me anxious," she

smiled. "Do you know that queer feeling—as if it couldn't last?"

He looked at her curiously. Two days ago, he would have laughed at the girlish fancy.

"You don't," she divined. "That's because you are so good. I'm not good at all. I'm restless, and impatient—and miserable."

He did contrive to laugh at this. "You've just told me you are happy! How do you manage to be both?"

"I knew you'd not believe me; but I mean, when—"

Joyce did not know, however, what she meant, and came to a full stop there, laughing herself. But her eyes glistened.

A great longing invaded him, and he rose, not master of himself. Was it love she needed? He turned half away from her, hearing the blackbird again, and aware of a silvery sky of fleecy and iridescent high clouds. He had to hide a pang that searched him.

"I'm fearfully foolish." She sounded vexed with herself.

"No, no," he said. "You're good.... What a lovely night this is!"

CHAPTER VIII

BY THE FORELOCK

How was it that Aunt Selinah, who had had but one brief love affair, knew the position of things? She did, that very evening.

"Stephen," she said, "that man's in love with our Joyce!"

The man in question had made a quiet exit, leaving as soon as Joyce had said good-night.

Stephen's mouth came open, as if he were listening to his own thoughts. They suggested a soft answer which stirred up wrath.

"Who wouldn't be?" said he.

"Who wouldn't be?" cried Aunt Selinah. "Wouldn't? Stephen, you talk like a great fond thing." She sat very upright, and her grey curly head gave a jerk. "You may find a satisfaction in that, but if you think anything of yourself at all, you'll think twice."

Grace intervened.

"I don't see any difference in Louis," she said.

But she had stopped sewing, and looked a little more properly anxious than he did.

"You wouldn't," her sister-in-law assented. "I never could tell *you* things. But when was I ever wrong about a thing of that kind? Never! Louis Knight's perfectly silly as he sits there. And though it's not my business, I think you make a deal too much of that young man, considering what he could do if he turned nasty. There! now you know it. Thank goodness, it isn't too late to prevent Joyce being a goose."

"Come, Selinah," said her brother. "You'll excite yourself, and have a bad night."

"That's nothing you need worry about, Stephen. I shan't be there to waken you. I have to feel an interest in your child because she takes after me, and you ought to be thankful. Grace, you're a fool."

Mrs. Merrall stretched a seam, and Stephen put his finger-tips together.

"You're not going to tell me," the old maid continued with an unexpected touch of snobbishness, "you'd be content to see her marry a clerk ten or fifteen years older than herself; for I call that sort of thing sinful, especially when the man's a clay image."

She waited in vain for an answer. When Aunt

Selinah's friendly interest rode the high horse, most people stood aside. It ran away with her.

"You don't mind? P'r'aps you think she's made of porcelain. You expect to keep her at home, I dare say.— Stephen, what are you worth?"

"Worth, Selinah?" He smiled provokingly. "Well, that's hardly for me to say, is it? Suppose you tell me what you think of me."

"I ask what you're *worth*," said his sister grimly.

"Oh. How much I possess, valued in pounds sterling. Well, that takes a little figuring out. Shall we say £40,000 as a going concern?"

"And more. You're the richest man in the Worth Valley; and if we knew all, I dare say you're richer than some people in Aireley that make a great puff and ado. I won't say Louis Knight thinks about that. He's a lamb. What I say is that he can't marry Joyce Merrall; and you'd better tell him so, before he begins to lose his appetite and see visions. He didn't make much of a supper, Grace. And for goodness' sake make an effort and get Joyce about a bit. She's as soft as a butter cake. It isn't your new-fangled teaching, Stephen, that'll make a silly girl into a woman, but her own sense when she sees what the world's like. I had to find things out for myself, and nobody got the better of me, I can tell you. Such coddling!"

Aunt Selinah sniffed, and hitched a little forward on her chair.

"Joyce goes where she pleases," Grace said, bridling, "when the work's done. But she likes to be at home, Selinah."

"Just so. You think her very tame and biddable, I know, Grace. But there you are—so keen about bed-quilts and table-centres that you can't spare a thought for your child's future. I don't forget the conversazione. You sat making shirts. Why don't you go to Leeds or Bradford for a month—or up to London, in the Season? What's the good of friends and relations?"

However shrewd these counsels may have been—it depends, perhaps, upon the purpose—such things were scarcely done in Aireley. One read of them in books. The Conversazione, held on four nights of winter at the Mechanics' Institute, was the one social public function in a twelvemonth.

"You expect her to find a husband at sales of work and tea-fights. My goodness!" Aunt Selinah's shrug and compressed lips were eloquent.

> "Thy little flock in safety keep,
> For lo! the wolf is nigh!"

she quoted. "If there is one thing more than another that makes me bilious and jumpy, it's your 'congregational life.' The inanity of it! It'll send me to

the wrong place when I die, I know very well. I'm not sure I wouldn't prefer that."

"Selinah!" Grace reproached.

"It's true, and when it's true I don't see why I shouldn't say it. I told our esteemed minister so. 'Like a little heaven below!' The smiling, spoony joy of everybody makes me wicked. 'Well, Miss Merrall,' he came up to me rubbing his hands—it was that very stupid evening with a magic lantern in the Holy-land, the magic all wrong. 'Well, my dear Miss Merrall, *so* pleased to see *you* here. These occasions are so recreative and congenial, are they not?' 'If you ask me,' I said, 'I'd sooner see a play.' He looked sorry he spoke. 'Let me get some new ideas and see new faces.' 'Ah, well,' the dear man sighed, 'we have to consider the young people.' Upon my word, Stephen, they talk as if children grew in cucumber frames and mustn't be let out. Molly-coddles, that's what the system produces; soft pockets; and then you wonder to see 'em make fools of 'emselves. Humph! They're ready made. What with views upside-down and the unleavened lecture, I broke a bottle of lavender-water . . ."

Stephen laughed outright.

"Of course," said Aunt Selinah, resuming her thread, "if you're hoping for a sweet young man in a shiny black coat and a halo, very well. I've done."

There was a restful space of silence, and her brother went to his pianoforte. "The fact is, Selinah," he said as he raised the lid, "we haven't begun to think about it."

She rattled on.

"Well, there's this about Joyce—she'll either be in love or out of it. Just realise that, before you play me out. She'll know her own mind, you may be sure. I always did. I don't say I'm very much afraid of Louis Knight; he isn't picturesque; but I thought it just as well to mention his tender flame. They see a good deal of each other as you manage things."

Then she rose, and pushed the dog from his place before the fire.

Her long, thin face, with the aggressive brow and beak, was redder than usual: the truth being that this peppery old maid had a very lively affection for her niece. She would have dearly liked to take in hand the business of "bringing Joyce out;" and her last penny would have been cheerfully spent upon the enterprise. She was saved a disappointment. Her theory that Joyce resembled her was a kind delusion, not to be realised by any process of education.

"As I remember him," said the blind man, pondering on her word "picturesesque," "he was a

surly, underslept-looking boy, with hair that wouldn't lie down."

"It's snod enough now," she rasped, "and he can look very pleasant. If he'd be surly I'd like him better. He lacks imperfections, Stephen. I won't call him a prig, because he's absurdly modest; but if he weren't he'd be unendurable. He gives me the fidgets. If you can tell me how to make him laugh—laugh, mind, not look happy—I'll be much obliged to you."

"You're a key too sharp for him," Stephen said humorously.

"I daresay; I am for most people. But there! I've no patience with young men that take so much pains with their manners. Why does he shave himself?"

They laughed, Merrall heartily; and so, for once in a way, did Aunt Selinah, whose mirth was a droll succession of snatched hilarities.

"I own Louis Knight puts me off my balance, poor soul," she said finally. "He's a social offence—an unmarried man with nothing better to say for himself than smile at the fire. I want to ruffle his topping. I'll do it!"

"To be sure. The lad's afraid of you, that's all."

"Afraid? He patronises me!"

When she was gone, Stephen rose from the piano and stood pondering.

"Poor Selinah!" he said. "Her disappointment soured a kind heart; and yet—she's very amusing."

The mother looked up at him. "Do you think she's right about Louis?"

"When she doesn't understand him?"

He came and sat down again, and Grace stitched on. Each waited for the other's word, but neither answered. The little gilt timepiece ticked away, the old dog snored, and the fire made a merry flicker. It was the blind man who broke the silence, speaking very deliberately though lightly.

"If it were so, I should be glad, Grace."

"Eh, Stephen!" she exclaimed. "You couldn't do without her."

CHAPTER IX

TOWN MANNERS

JOYCE was at her window doing her hair one day, when she saw George Marlowe coming up the lane.

Apart from the surprise, he interested her immensely. George was stylishly dressed and had a small moustache, but she knew him by his walk and way of looking about him. She instantly recalled the valentine, and smiled; he looked superior to the folly of having ever sent it.

"I wonder if he's got a sweetheart," she thought. "He's very smart."

She kept behind the curtains, and saw him look at all the windows as he passed. Somehow his eyes were bold, although they swept the house quickly; and a blush came into Joyce's cheeks.

He was wearing a light grey suit, a broad-brimmed hat of white straw with a blue band, a wondrous lavender necktie, and yellow shoes; and he carried a walking-stick and gloves. She wore gloves herself, but, as a rule, on Sundays only. Her mild criticism was that he looked very "townified" and quite

a man—older than his age, which was nineteen. While going by, he put the gloves in his pocket and took out a cigar case. She saw him hold up his chin to draw the first long puff, as if he enjoyed it. Her father and Louis did not smoke.

Joyce finished her hair and put a blouse on, wondering if it was pleasant to live in Leeds. She decided that she would not like it.

To her the town seemed a very big and busy place. There were fine shops, a theatre where she had seen her first and only pantomime, and a Town Hall where, more recently and memorably, she had heard Albani sing one Christmas in "The Messiah." But Leeds was a sooty and very noisy place, and all Leeds people did not talk in a homely way. Unpleasant things were the coarseness of some poor people there, and the harsh look and flashiness of other people. She did not feel comfortable in the streets.

Downstairs, the girl found Betty much excited about some bad behaviour on the part of Rags.

"Barkin'! I niver heared nought like it; I'd to fotch him in by t' collar. An' yesterda', he made a fuss of a ragabrash beggarman chap, wi' windy hoiles like a flaecraw. Look at his tail waggin'! Ah, y'owd graceless! . . . But I think that young man flourished his stick."

Joyce guessed; and, laughing, asked if Rags had barked at George Marlowe.

"Nay, wor *that* George Marlowe? Why, he s'ouldn't don sich fine cloathes, then. Dog took him for some outlander."

"What wonder?" said Joyce's mother, instantly on guard. "They don't see much of him at home."

That was a terrible censure, Leeds being not much more than twenty miles off. But, then, consider the case.

In going to Leeds, George Marlowe had been cheerfully turned loose by a father unlike Joyce's. He was self-reliant enough after a free boyhood, and he had some craft by nature; he would "keep his end up," said the manure dealer. George was doing so. If his people grumbled, it was because they did not see things from George's point of view.

Home had no great charms for him. For his brusque old money-making sire he had, indeed, a liking, much warmer than he knew; but his only intimacy with this free-handed tyrant had been that of an occasional rude thrashing. Correction was administered suddenly, in the handiest manner practicable at the moment. Even this had ceased for him at thirteen. Marlowe *père* was stout; and George's emancipation came when he dodged a hurtling chair once, and, remarking with great impudence, "Well

aimed, Governor," snatched his cap and ran. For his mother, unfortunate woman, George had no love at all. She was dull, and reticent, and mistrustful; and her timid conventional goodness did not, of course, appeal to him.

He was launched, then. He worked in a slubbing dye-house, and dyers are rough. He attended evening classes at Yorkshire College, and, having pocket money, was in favour with a fast young set.

These discreditable students, a small minority of the non-residential college, sought such cheap adventures as the street and Woodhouse Moor afforded after class, or Roundhay Park on Sundays. With a little honesty, it might have been well enough. But the sport went beyond valentines. George degenerated. However, Marlowe senior had good reports from the chemical works of his lad's cleverness; and for the rest he was content to have given the young rascal fair warning.

"If yo' get in a scrape," he said when George left home, "think on, yo' munnot come to me to get yo' out on't. I'll pay your lodgin'-bill an' find yo' i' cloathes to wear, an' 'low yo' a pound i' t' week spendin'-brass. So now yo're on your own, George."

After three years of it, George was home for a holiday, refreshing himself with rustic sporting men and poachers, and finding sport of another kind at moorside

inns with the servants. There he was a gay young dog who had admirers. They found him generous. "He taks after th' owd man," the opinion was; "an' yet, for all that, he's a gentleman." Which qualification meant that he dressed well, put on airs, and only spoke the dialect for gamesomeness.

Joyce, despatched to Aireley on a shopping errand, met him on the little station platform. He was grown up, decidedly; for he raised his hat and came to speak to her without hesitation.

"Good morning, Miss Merrall," said he. "You're quite a stranger."

She was conscious of flushing and feeling awkward. But she answered brightly, with an effort at composure: "You mean that you are." Ought she to give him her hand? she wondered.

"Yes, it's my fault," he smiled. "Fact is, I didn't think you'd remember me."

"Oh, yes!" protested Joyce. "You shot one of our pigeons, you know!"

And then she was taken with a little panic—because she did not know just how to end the conversation. Joyce glanced at the train—which stood there waiting, Ousenup being a terminal station—and held her hand out.

"I'm going to Aireley," he said; and his eyes questioned her.

"Oh, then, we can ride together."

She said that crimsoning, because there seemed to be nothing else for it. So George Marlowe opened a carriage door for her. Fortunately, it was that of a first-class compartment.

"I ride third!" cried Joyce.

In her confusion she hastened down the train without seizing the opportunity to say good-bye. She chose a compartment nearly full, however, and there her natural assurance returned at once. She could sit without feeling it necessary to pay much attention to him; and George, who had no mind to do his flirting publicly, said hardly a word while the twenty minutes' journey lasted. She could not guess, when he paid his fare to the ticket collector, that he had left Ousenup solely for her company.

The case was even worse. After twenty minutes' contemplation of her pure and fresh beauty, George Marlowe was hot in love with it, if not with her.

They got out; and once more, being unpractised, Joyce lacked an expedient for getting rid of him.

"Are you expecting somebody?" he asked.

"No. I have a little shopping to do."

"May I escort you?"

He smiled more than she liked, as if he knew she couldn't say no. And the situation — the affected word "escort" even—was new to her.

"If you care to."

"Thanks," he said. "I've missed so much through being away, you see."

"I'm sure you must be dull in Leeds," she answered, quite sincerely.

"Dull as an owl. Do you come to Aireley often?"

"Not very."

Somehow, what he said as they walked up the town clashed with his good looks. But Joyce thought rather well of his looks, remembering the rough boy he was; and it was the first time she had walked with any one, either of his sex or of her own, who seemed to be specially well dressed. If he had put her quite at ease, she might have been pleased with him. She blamed herself, however; she did not know "town manners."

Unjudged, he continued a ready flow of commonplace, until at the first shop-door she said good-bye. Then he held her hand a little, his eyes twinkling.

"Shall I see you sometimes?"

"I don't—I daresay you may," she said. "Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Miss Merrall."

As she entered the shop she did not know at once what it was she wanted there.

"Dad," said Joyce that evening, "I saw George Marlowe to-day. . . . I don't think I like him much."

And she told what had happened—but briefly, as it

only seemed to merit. Her father had to infer the young man's boldness, and her own behaviour.

"What is he like, Joyce?"

She thought awhile. "Everything he has on looks new," was the best she could find to say; "and he talks—like a man."

"Well? I haven't seen him, you know. What is his face like?"

"Oh, how can I tell you!"

Her embarrassment troubled him.

"Does he look like his father, or his mother?"

"Both, I think."

"Honest and kind?"

"Kind, yes; that is, he's pleasant."

"Not honest, then?"

"I—I don't know. His eyes sparkle, rather. I couldn't tell what he was thinking. . . . I mean——"

"Yes?"

"He had two thoughts at once. One about what he was saying . . ."

"And one about my sweetheart? Or himself, was it?"

Joyce laughed, and, laying her hands upon his shoulders, kissed her father on the brow, repeatedly. "Perhaps he had three thoughts," she said. "He has a little moustache, and wears cuffs and gloves

and a stiff collar! He smells of tobacco, and some kind of scent. There!"

"Bless me!" said Stephen Merrall. "Quite an adventure, Joyce."

"It was bewildering."

They laughed together. She still sat sometimes on her father's knee; and now she put an arm round his neck.

CHAPTER X

LUCK OF THE WEATHER

Two days later, Rags was taking her for a walk in the cool hour after tea, before the mill "loosed."

He did so frequently. Having come to an age when exercise was needful to his health, Rags made a point of it, she said. But whether Rags or his blithe young mistress most enjoyed these expeditions, it might be hard to say. They were made, as a rule, in one direction, by one or other of half-a-dozen ways—up between the steep banks of highland where the valley ceases. There is wild sweet ground there, stream-channelled, tortuous, rock-set; hill-top farmsteads perched above the gullies; and at last the streams lead up to untilled land where mosscrop flowers like cotton-down, and bilberry brightens all the knolls and rises.

Rags loved the water. He went splashing through it, nosing the banks and stones for unknown traces. She enjoyed the air where larks were singing, the fresh, moist air of the hollows, sun-slanted, the great dry breath of the moorland when she reached it.

Joyce climbed rapidly with ease. Sure-footed, light of limb and light of heart, she never thought of pausing but to pluck some flower or laugh at the dog's diversions, which delighted her. The paths broke out on rugged land, high ragwort growing yellow; or climbed to the grey farmhouses; or, being unbeaten, grew too faint to follow. She gave no heed to them. The hills were all familiar to her, foot and eye. This blocked-in valley split and twisted up, much chamfered by head-waters past or present; she knew each secret turn of them, shy nesting-place, green sop, bleak alder-bank, rough scree, and haunt of particular wild-flower; where not to go in rainy times, where frost wrought marvels, from which bold head and dingle curve she could see the house hilled-in below, or the top of the mill's tall chimney.

She cried the wet dog on, sharing his curious hunt. "Good Rags! Sniff, old boy! Something's been round that stone, hasn't it?"

The higher ground was a desolation, in which her eager spirit revelled—a tossed and broken moor far spreading into haze. Stone-getters had come and gone there; a gutted house in ruin, strangely new, stood out upon one quarried ridge; a road went by it, leading nowhere. All life had come to a queer cessation. But over the rushes came a sweet wind

streaming, curlews cried, and the long grey leagues of sun-warm heather waited.

Some confident joy of expectation thrilled her, a little strangeness at the heart of it. She fell to walking quietly, and sang:

> "From the eyes of Heaven above us
> Fall the trembling golden starbeams
> Through the night, and all my being
> Turns to love and tender longing."

It was her maidenhood singing, unconfined. The sky and the virgin waste-lands know our secret, and hear it without a thought.

But, even as she sang, Joyce grew aware of an anxious stillness all about her, and a livid cast of the light; and, turning, she saw the dale deep blue for thunder. The house was already shadowed; weak sunlight slanted on the hillsides near.

She began to return, and soon was running. Rags trotted close beside her.

From her mother, Joyce inherited or had learned a dread of thunderstorms. She saw sheet lightning flicker in the clouds' deep bosom, and caught her breath; a panic of indecision struck her, whether to make for the nearest farm or still run on. At all events she must keep to the road, though it wound about deplorably. In rain the streamsides would be all impracticable.

She ran herself out of breath. Against the fallen wind the storm came up apace; but a stitch in her side obliged her to walk. Just then, with a little swirl of dust, the first big drops came. She started forward. A white flash blinded her, and crash fell the thunder about her head. It resounds at all times imminent and awful among these hills. Her fright was extreme; and, quickly drenched, her thin blouse clinging to arms and shoulders, her hair falling, her daintiness all bedraggled, she fled without a thought of the downpour.

Half-way down there was a barn by the roadside, with a spacious porch. She reached it, panting and weak, as another crackling flash and detonation stunned her; and reeled into the shelter with her eyes covered.

There she sank upon the flags in a corner, and the dog, unnoticed, licked her face. Joyce, indeed, was half-unconscious with terror and a sense of suffocation. But there, too, George Marlowe sheltered quite unmoved; and her sudden appearance, a huddled and quivering figure, surprised him with quick pleasure.

He was not of a nature to be keenly sympathetic; he could not imagine such extreme trepidation. But at any rate her half-drowned plight appealed to him. He took his coat off. She looked up when he spoke to

her, but did not answer; and he put it over her shapely arms regretfully, with an eye on the dog, who only whimpered. Joyce shrank a little; not well aware of what he was doing.

Having done it, he felt very sorry to see her so hapless and so scared. At the next flash she exclaimed; and he was promptly down on his knees with an arm about her.

"It's all right, Miss Merrall," he assured her. "Don't be frightened."

She disengaged herself; wringing his fingers, her eyes wide.

"It'll soon be over, it came so suddenly. You aren't cold, are you?"

Sobs began to convulse her in spite of a frantic effort to control them, and in the end she was hysterical. For the storm was clamorous; raged for a time with one incessant flutter driving past the porch, and crash upon deafening crash.

"It's nothing, Joyce," he kept on saying. But he held her tightly, pulling the coat well about her.

Rags sat shivering, with uneasy whines now and then.

At length the storm was rolling away beyond the hills, even to her apprehension; and she found her self-respect again.

"Please let me go," she said.

He saw her flushed, indeed, for sudden shame; and as she spoke with unexpected dignity and decision, he freed her in the moment of surprise.

Joyce found then that she was wearing his coat. "Oh," she cried, "you shouldn't have done that!" It touched her.

He was on his feet almost as soon as she was, begging her to keep it on.

"I'm all right," he said. "I'm as warm as a toast, I am indeed, Miss Merrall. I didn't get wet. You *must* keep it on till you can start."

He looked so suppliant that, to avoid a struggle about it, she yielded, turning away to go and look up at the sky.

"It'll soon be over," he said again, following her.

She cried, "Oh, I hope so!" and then, with an effort, thanked him. "But I shall never forgive myself for letting you see me so silly," she flamed.

He had behaved very well, however; and he added to her obligations by saying, in the most boy-like way, "Oh, that's nothing. My sister's just the same."

"I can't bear thunder," she explained.

At a distant afterclap her eyes grew large again; but she did not retreat from the door, or look at him. He had an uneasy feeling that Joyce would owe him a "grudge."

"I'll go for a shawl," he said on a sudden; and, disregarding her cry of remonstrance, he ran to a neighbouring farm for one.

There was no more lightning, and Joyce had time to feel pleased with him. What should she say for herself at home, after laughing at George Marlowe's clothes and declaring she did not like him? He had been kind. One's first experience of gallantry—who does not remember the pride and strangeness of it? The stir at her breast, still tremulous from its commotion, was, curiously, a little glad; and when he came back with the shawl she had a smile for him.

"Oh!" she cried, "now you're wet yourself!"

"Not to speak of. Besides," he ventured, "I'd do anything for you."

She blushed—divinely!—and was not at all vexed.

"May I?" he asked, grown bold.

"What?"

But when he would have kissed her, she repulsed him in alarm. "If you are rude I shall dislike you very much," she said; and he saw she meant that.

"Oh, well! Give me the coat!" he huffed.

She handed it to him with a chilling "Thank you," and the tears stood in her eyes.

Then he laughed, which undid all.

She put the shawl on and held out her hand, with a proud mind. He did not offer to take it.

"Good-bye," said Joyce then. "I'd rather walk home alone. Thank you very much for what you have done."

George was too much astonished to follow her.

CHAPTER XI

GEORGE MARLOWE CALLS

JOYCE'S pride had brought about a strange thing. Surprised and pleased with his own behaviour, George Marlowe resolved in five minutes that he would lead a better life; and, if his notions of what this change involved were hazy, one should make allowances. He might have made use of his opportunity to improve acquaintance without repenting; it was so plainly the correct thing to call next day, with a polite enquiry about Joyce's health.

Hazy those notions were, deplorably; but the impulse came to him strong and clear. He could not fail to see—it might have been plain to a simpler mind than his—that Joyce Merrall was a great and wonderful chance thrown in his way by Fortune. It is not for this, of course, that every one will side against him; business acumen is rare at his age, except in the street arab—who sometimes lacks only steadiness to be a great man in England. And in all moral life, as in an illness, one important thing is to "get the turn."

6—(2086)

"If I can bring it off," said this man of nineteen, with great determination, "I'll run straight, so help me Bob I will. I've done with mashing and boozing about; it doesn't pay a man, any how. I say, won't the governor be suited!"

He was on terms with himself of a rather coarse familiarity; but it promised well that he did not forget the amends he owed for liberal treatment.

"And the mater. Hang it, she means well. I'll go to chapel and all—see if I can't make up a lot to her. I shall have to do it! Joyce is such a good little dear, bless her! . . . Ah," said George, "they don't know what they do for a man. One thing—I'll never deny her what she wants, if it breaks me!"

At Wake House, then, he called; confounding Betty with the unaccustomed sight of a visiting card. Grace Merrall, for whom the card was respectfully intended, lost her head a little too. In a visiting card seen for the first time, there may be something neatly business-like which, in private life, is formidable. She took her apron off, told Betty to show him into "the room," and hurriedly made a toilette.

"Good afternoon," she began, not liking his looks, but saying her duty, "I'm glad to see you, and thank you; Joyce has told us what you did for her."

"Oh, don't mention it," said George in his best manner. "I hope Miss Merrall took no harm."

"No; she doesn't soon catch cold. . . .Will you sit down?"

It was a Saturday, and Stephen came home to find his wife engaged with the visitor. He relieved her; the more readily as an opportunity of judging this confident youth was welcome. George felt himself at home, however.

"I'm glad to see you, Mr. Merrall," he said heartily. "I've always thought it was a pity about your being blind. Mrs. Merrall says you never complain, but I know I should. I hope business is all right."

"Yes, thank you," said Stephen, smiling. "Let's see, you're in Leeds, aren't you? Learning dyeing."

"Oh, yes, *I'm* doing very well." George hesitated, and then plunged. "It's in my line, I think. I can hit a colour, some way, every time nearly," he explained, "and get it with stuff the boss daren't use; cheaper, you know. The great thing they're wanting is mordants for anilines, that'll really fasten them. I've found two or three, already."

"That's capital."

"Well, it's got to be born in you. I don't brag about it, though it sounds like it. . . . You know my governor. He's clever. He's all there," said George.

"Yes, I know Mr. Marlowe. And what sort of friends do you find in Leeds? Plenty of nice people?"

It was not a comfortable question; but, having reformed, he told the truth in a burst of conscientiousness. "Well, not so far, not what you'd call really nice. I mean to look out, though."

"That's right. We don't see much of you at Ousenup."

The implication did not trouble him. "It's very kind of you to say so," he said alarmingly. "I'll call oftener if I may, sir."

"Let me see," Stephen fenced. "You've not been at home for eighteen months, I think."

But Mrs. Merrall returned to offer him tea. George said, well, yes, he didn't mind a cup, and so preceded her to the living-room, where Joyce was "pouring out." Joyce's conscience pricked her for stinted gratitude, and a little thrill of pride at his call had touched her. She looked very sweet, he thought, as she asked him about sugar and cream. For his own part, George behaved adroitly; he addressed his easy conversation to the heads of the household—wondering which had the upper hand.

The subject was town against country.

"Oh, I think there's no comparison," he laughed. "There's so much going on in a town, and you feel freer. Of course, at first," he tried for a note of modesty, "I didn't know my way about; but that's passed off. I do as I like now—I mean I can do, you

know. I can go where I want and keep my own. If ever you come, Mrs. Merrall, I'll show you round."

Of course, he underestimated these good folks' discernment. Fair intentions played him false, putting him off his guard a little. He enlarged, and Stephen had less and less to say. His dislike of the lad's vulgarity was deepening to weariness, and he smarted for his wife and daughter. If he intervened, it was to save all three.

"Ah, well," he laughed at last, "you musn't run us down to your new friends. We're simple folk, you know." And he rose.

But the visitor did not think of going. When Louis Knight came in, an hour or so later, he found the egregious youngster there; and George, relieved of the blind man's cross-examination—which had by that time turned him inside out and found some holes in the lining—made up to Joyce.

He did so with a facile friendliness that amazed the new comer unpleasantly. So far as Louis could hear, he told her tales about dogs, poaching dogs and others, to which she listened with a lively interest.

"They're as cunning as you or me," he was saying. "Oh, I could tell you lots more like that." And he went on to do so with enthusiasm.

This intimacy of Miranda with Caliban — Louis

thought of the names freely, not as labelling his opinion of young Marlowe—was a woeful thing to see. Her lover's heart beat dismally, confusing his ears for Merrall's talk; and now, at all events, that sure observer, blind though he was, knew how it stood with Louis.

"But you must keep your dog in," George was heard in a pause. "He'd be killed in a minute."

Then Stephen spoke to him. "Well, George Marlowe," he said, "we're going to talk a little business now. I hope you'll enjoy your holiday."

Joyce reddened, Louis looked down his nose; but the boy was not abashed.

"Oh, I beg pardon," said he, and got up. "Well, I've had a nice time, and I'm much obliged for your hospitality. I'd like to drop in again some time, if it isn't asking too much."

"Well," answered Stephen, "we're a very quiet household, and——"

"That's what I like!" George assured him with great heartiness.

"I mean that you'd be rather out of place, I think, in our circle."

It was said in the blind man's quietest way, and in a tone not hostile. But, even so, it was far from subtle; and George understood so well that a chill went down his back.

"Oh," he said, and stood very docile.

"Good-bye; and thank you." Stephen rose to shake hands.

"Well, good-bye. Good-bye, Mrs. Merrall, then. Good-bye, Joyce." There had been no introduction to Louis, so to him the boy said nothing.

"Remember me to your father," Stephen added pleasantly. "Give George Marlowe his hat, Joyce. The shawl you borrowed so kindly was returned this morning, and I think we've all recovered. Good-night."

Joyce said good-night again at the door, not unamicably.

Success had been so easy and delightful that George could overlook the snub. It had not hurt, it had only surprised him; nor did he consider that it blocked his prospect of happiness.

"I stopped too long," he thought. "But she knows what I stopped for, if he doesn't. *By!*" said George. "She's a picture."

Perhaps it was success unmerited, perhaps exhilaration, that set him off to the Moorcock Inn, where strong temptations haunted. At all events there was no debate; he quite forgot "the turn." The Moorcock is a snug, plain place of sanded kitchens, clean, well victualled, hearty, out-of-the-way. On Saturday nights you are sure of a rouse there; it

beckons men from far; and George, who had found it out the week before, was not in doubt of his welcome.

With a foaming pot on the table he cracked, at his own expense, a sort of joke.

"Well, chaps," said he—the dialect may sound facetious—and raised the ale and nodded round. "Here's good-bye to t' Moorcock, an' mony on 'em!"

CHAPTER XII

KNIGHT-ERRANTRY

It happens most unhappily in Yorkshire, that some, who jest in dialect while knowing English well, are gross. They talk it as the negro " 'verts " ; and a folk-speech full of antique charm, that interests even Oxford, is vilified extremely. In the same humour George drank his ale.

Meantime Louis sat late with his friend, who laid all manner of friendly snares in hope of a declaration.

It did not come—Louis did not even see the snares in question. The sole direct success of Stephen's skill was to keep him there till midnight, and so arrange, unwittingly, that he should help George Marlowe home. For himself, he went to bed perplexed and found a wakeful pillow.

Louis, in crossing the dale, heard scraps of drunken song ahead of him, now rising high, now maundering ; all on a cheerful theme, it seemed, but most incompetent. He came upon the singer wayfallen. The night was pitch black ; the change in George's voice disguised him ; and, when our Good Samaritan asked his name, George asked him if he knew his father.

"Who is your father?" Louis inquired; and George said once more: "Do you know him?"

Louis laughed and struck a match.

In the spectacle a drunken boy presents there is nothing funny. Louis forgot all about his jealousy, his sharp dislike, and his pleasure at Stephen's handling, instantly upon seeing the limp, pale scapegrace propped against a wall.

"All right," he said. "I know you. I'll get you home."

"You're a b—brick!" said George. "What's *your* name?"

"Knight. Don't you know me? We met at Mr. Merrall's."

The effect of reminding him was to start the foolish song again; and this time Louis recognised it.

"There's pret lil girl 'at *I* know!
You know!
We *all* know!"

—sang his rival.

Louis's disgust and indignation were greater than any one else's could have been. He held off a little. When the droning ceased, however, he lifted George to his feet and got an arm about him; and so, with occasional bruises from the walls that grazed his shins, being low and roughly built, they stumbled through the darkness. The boy laughed at accidents

convulsively, and Louis tried to think of something else.

"You won' tell Miss Mer'll," George pleaded. "You're good sort, bu' rather quiet." He hung on to Louis's shoulder, compelling a halt. "Joyce," he confided, gloomily, "thinks lot of you. I'm goin' to pull up an' marry her, be happy ever after."

The time for this appeal was unfortunately chosen. It was more than Louis Knight's charity could do to keep his arm round such a devotee, and George went down. But he had to be put in a place of safety. Louis got him home, knocked, heard some one coming, and left the sorry boy in a heap on the door-step.

That encounter decided things for Louis. He held no more debate with himself than George had done about the Moorcock. Till some days after, indeed, he did not know that his mind had changed; but changed it had. There might be circumstances in which even he could aspire to marry Joyce.

Joyce had seen enough to guide her too. As she now considered, George was coarse, and thought too well of himself, and took great liberties. Her mother's opinion went with hers.

Stephen kept his own unspoken, except to agree with them. He wished to have Joyce's confidence whatever happened.

What did happen showed her the young pretender in

a new phase, one sincerely interesting to her. He was ashamed and ill after the excess; on Sunday night he came to chapel. A very persuasive preacher, talking charitably and frankly from his own experience, there took hold of him; and George was out of spirits for days. Joyce caught his wistful look as the chapel emptied. On Monday, while she was buying stamps at the little post office down the lane, he came in for some cigarettes, and they left the shop together.

"Good-bye, Miss Merrall," he said, with a downcast air. "I'm not good enough to be seen with *you*."

Joyce thought he resented the snub. "Oh, I'm sure father didn't mean that!" she cried. Her quick sympathy was all awake in a moment.

"No, it's me that means it,'' said George with ungrammatical meekness—and walked away!

Her father, too, was a little touched by the incident, and disposed to repent of his coolness. He said, "I hope he'll mend, Joyce. We shall see, shan't we?"

It was in this posture of affairs that she happened upon him again while out walking, and fell into the talk that made trouble.

For, in spite of his heroic abnegation, George had been at considerable pains to put himself in her way. His fear was, that self-reproach had made an end of his chances. He saluted shamefacedly; and she saw that he wished to speak.

"Oh, George, I'm sorry you're so unhappy!" she cried, and laid her hand upon his arm.

As the worst of his woe was over, it may be counted a grace in George to have blushed. But he took his cue all the same. He stood looking at the grass, and conjectured, very dismally, that it couldn't be helped.

"Don't say that," she implored him. "I'm sure, if you try, you may be as good as any one."

He looked, if anything, still more glum, and after a long pause blurted out, "I can't see that it matters!"

"Oh, but it does!" cried Joyce, distressed.

"Not to anybody else."

"How can you say so? It matters to me, a great deal. I've thought of your sad face on Sunday night and Monday ever since."

He looked a quick surprise, unaware that his face had told such tales. She was really a bit fond of him, then, his vanity said. He went on harping on the useful string, with both hands plunged in his pockets.

"If I cared it might be different," he grumbled to a world all grey. The sun shone brightly, but not, it seemed, for him. "I don't care enough in myself."

His face belied him, so Joyce said, "Oh, yes, you do!

You wouldn't be saying so if you didn't, would you? Why, think!"

Whereupon he stood first on one foot, then on the other, and applied himself to boring a hole with his heel.

"It's because you care that you feel so cast down, as if you couldn't care," she argued, eloquently.

"It's because I love you," said George.

The shock to Joyce was extreme, almost as if he had struck her, or burst out laughing.

"Oh, you mustn't!" she cried. "I'm not going to marry, ever."

"Not marry?" Her accent of intense meaning startled him. "Why not?"

"Because of my father."

A flush came slowly into his face, and then a sickly smile, unpleasant to see, like a sneer.

"I may as well chuck it, then."

"Yes, yes!" she said, not divining all he meant.

"Right O!"

He spun round in the hole his heel had made.

"But—but you won't give up trying to be good!" she stipulated, quickly.

He hesitated, not to give her the promise, but to say a brutal thing to that pleading face. And he may have been a little touched.

"Well," he reddened again, "if you'd rather."

"Oh, yes!" Joyce was hurt, but too much concerned for him to show it. "Would you like,' she asked him after a pause, "to turn back with me?"

His chance might not be done for, after all! He went with her accordingly; and if ever a moonish hypocrite was helped by any sweet girl's homily, he should have been transformed.

When she told this story, Joyce left out one thing. She did not say what reason she had given George Marlowe for refusing to hear love talked about. She only gave the reason again to her father. Stephen had heard it a hundred times; she would not marry. He had often kissed her for it before. But now he did not say, as usual, "We'll see about that."

He was troubled.

He had no right, he thought, to assume George Marlowe insincere or fickle, and none as a Christian to discourage Joyce in some well-doing. But he spied a real danger in it, a possibility of her pleasant life being spoiled. Joyce's delicate true instincts were all against any friendship with such a booby, and they might be hoodwinked by a friendship on this footing. She would condone so much for what seemed more important to her. She would lightly pity, and therefore under-estimate, the boy's quite hopeless faults of breed. Whether he lived a good life or not,

she would inevitably be drawn to him, and made unhappy, if they still saw each other often.

What if he proved a very persistent love-maker? Stephen stood with his arms about her, and sought for the right word to say.

"How long," he asked, "is he staying in Ousenup?"

"Another week, Dad," she said.

"Ah." He kissed her again. "I hope you may have done him some sort of good, dear."

She was silent.

"Some seed fell by the way-side, some in stony places, some among thorns, you know."

"And you think——?"

"No; only that we mustn't take things too much to heart. . . Go now, and help your mother with the supper, dearie."

CHAPTER XIII

LOUIS TAKES UP THE GAUNTLET

THERE was a party of Stephen's Merrall's friends that night; and, after supper, the talk turned upon theatre-going. Among Nonconformists in the Yorkshire Dales, that subject is discussed or left alone, on simple lines; and the general view continues to be, that the theatre does more harm than good, and ought to be shunned for example's sake, even when offering moral plays. But two of Stephen's guests had seen that week, at Bradford, a religious drama then much talked about. The argument waxed hot.

They were accused of "eating things offered in sacrifice unto idols," and exhorted to remember St. Paul's doctrine on the subject: "If meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no meat while the world standeth."

"That play," replied the heretic-in-chief, who taught in a Sunday School, "'ll make nobody offend. Ye're talking about theatres, I'm on plays. We might as well talk about reading, when every man can pick his own books. If all good folk read nought but

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their Bibles, every other book printed ud be a bad book. When I paid a shilling to see that play, I thought I did a duty; and I think it yet!"

"Robert, thou makes me angry," said the accuser. "Every book's separate, isn't it? How'd ta like one o' thy scholars to see wheere thou went, an' git th' habit o' goin' theere reg'lar?"

Louis was for liberty; Stephen sat in his favourite pose of joined finger-tips, and listened with a smile. Not until they had talked themselves to a stand, a hostile and implacable silence rather painful, did he quietly ask for a description of the play in question. Then he sprang a surprise upon his wife.

"Mother, you're going to Bradford to-morrow. Take Joyce with you, and stay for a night at the theatre."

Grace urged a difficulty—which he had, apparently, foreseen. She was to visit a sick friend in a nursing institution, with a permit for one person only. "I shouldn't know where to leave her in the afternoon," she said.

"Why, Louis 'll see to that," he answered. "To-morrow's market-day, you know." (That was to say, Louis, too, would be in Bradford.) "Louis, you might like to stay late yourself."

It was then that Louis, falling in with the little plot, caught himself in a mind to make the most of his

opening. He felt an overweening eagerness—unmistakably a quick delight of purpose. This brought, however, the thought that, if he meant indeed to be more than a friend, he must speak first with his employer. He bade good-night before the others. He had to think, to see his way; and the excitement which that necessity caused was urgent.

He met Joyce with her mother soon after high market, and took her out to Manningham Park.

She was deliciously light-hearted, breathing all the joy of a glorious summer day and a rare experience. Louis saw this exquisite joy radiant on her pure face, and could not speak to her; because the only words that would have voiced him truly were, "You are a spirit, and I worship you, love you." Dared he think that any of her joy was for him?

They sat by the lake, a stiffly artificial sheet of water with banks of concrete, and iron seats all round it on a gravelled walk. There were children sailing boats, and many visitors besides themselves. But Joyce's eyes were on the dancing leaves, the rippling water full of light, the unclouded sky. She sank back with a great sigh of happiness.

"Isn't the world wonderful!"

He thought so indeed. The chiefest wonder of the world sat even by his side. "More," he said, in a low tone, "than we shall ever tell each other."

"Yes; I meant that! I try to tell father; but oh——!"

Her face had for a moment the grey look he knew, troubling him; and during a long ten minutes they both kept silence.

"I believe," said Louis, at last, "somehow, I've never thought much how happy life may be for one."

She saw his eyes fixed upon the water, and wondered at him, as she had often vaguely done before. He had kind, brown eyes not unlike her mother's. His confession told her nothing new; he was always so busy about her father's affairs. But the aquiline strength of his profile pleased her. Poor Louis!

"If you could teach me," he turned to her—and broke off. "Tell me what you are thinking just now. Will you?"

Her eyes fluttered and fell. "It wouldn't help you."

"Still, tell me."

"But—it was about you." The dear colour in her cheeks mounted.

"Ah, then I won't ask."

An impulse of frankness made her speak nevertheless. She said, "I was feeling glad you'd thought of that."

"Being happy?" How his pulses laboured!

"Yes."

Had she looked at him quickly, Joyce must have

" *You're not vexed, Louis?* "

seen the ardent secret in his eyes. But when she did look, raising hers anxiously, to see if he took her plainness amiss, he had himself in hand. He was pale, but he smiled.

"No, it doesn't help; but I'm glad you told me," he said simply.

His quiet way of taking it made her feel as if she had spoken very boldly; he was so much older than she was. "You seemed so content," she began to explain, going deeper, "and you are so good—that I thought you ought to——"

"Ought what?"

"You ought to be married, I thought." She brought it out with her serious expression, looking straight at him, though she flushed.

"If I could marry you!" would have been so easy to say, that Louis felt a stab of bitterness. He turned his head. In this tampering there was poor pleasure; yet her girlish kindness uttered the sweetest things his ears had heard from a woman. The bitterness was, not that he must hold his peace still, but that, if it had been more than kindness, she could not have said those things. They killed the new hope within him.

"You're not vexed, Louis? You don't think I'm a busy-body? I didn't want to say it, you know."

"No, no!"

A shiver went through him as he pulled his wits together. He heard himself say in his ordinary tones, as if somebody spoke for him: "It isn't every man who can find a wife, Joyce; that's all."

"Oh," she said, "I'm sure no one has refused *you*, Louis!"

"No, no one has refused me yet."

He rose from the iron seat, and the smile he gave her in saying, "Shall we walk through the park?" made Joyce very sorry for him. She put her hand within his arm.

She was thinking of George Marlowe, too—how he had looked when she refused him. But he was not nice, like Louis. To see that Louis was unhappy under all—quite sadly unhappy, by his look—troubled the pleasant day for her. She had to hope that he would find some one; her romantic mind pictured the wife he ought to have, some sweet and rich lady, perhaps older than himself. Joyce resolved to be very kind to him.

He was dearly aware of this tenderness, which continued all day for him. He read it aright; she wished to reassure him. Its note was in her voice, talking of other matters; and her eyes looked it if ever he ventured to meet them.

He had to shun their glance, yet tenderness was what he most adored in her.

He knew this at the theatre, seeing a white tear glisten upon her cheek as she watched, rapt from him, the heroic fate of a Christian girl in the days of Nero. Her face was transfigured then. Its pity abashed him, for until that moment she, and not the play, had held his thoughts; and yet it drew him near to her, since he forgot the aloofness of vain longing.

All the way home, Louis saw her spirit musing on the imagined martyrdom.

"Good-night, Louis," she said at the gate. "I think we're all happiest when we don't know it." She pressed his hand on that wise speech.

"It has been a happy day," said he; "I know that."

"Oh, yes! A great day."

Her mother half feared, just then, that he had spoken.

CHAPTER XIV

AUNT SELINAH'S TACT

ON the morrow a famous sale of work was opened, another one for which Selinah Merrall had trimmed a cradle; and it not only furnished all our people with a sight of George Marlowe in high feather, but stood in the way of Louis's talk with Stephen. While it lasted, there were no quiet evenings.

The great towns have a sadly inadequate notion of what a bazaar may be.

In London, bargain sales, at which it is said wild ladies fight for trophies, are great and simultaneous; but they excite no general home interest comparable to that of a sale of work at Ousenup. Aunt Selinah, the strongest-minded woman in half a shire, was enslaved equally with Mrs. Marlowe.

For see how the sale was advertised. Every good lady had to know what all her friends were doing for it, and to do, if possible, something finer. Every good girl desired to sell at a stall. Every good man, and every other man, was dunned for a donation. Nothing of equal interest, but Christmas, occurred in the round plain year.

The sale was held in an old, low-ceilinged schoolroom, underneath the chapel. Its glories were dim by day with a more than religious light; for the stalls blocked up the windows, and made things look, as Aunt Selinah said, like a ragshop. By day a few slow purchasers, whom age or stoutness indisposed for the later crush, went peering about by the light of two poor gas-jets. Then it was that stallholders, without much risk of heartbreak, might quiz each other's stocks. But at night the schoolroom, noisy and hot like a hive, might have thrown off swarms and made more honey.

It was one dense, roaring cluster under a flaring heat of gas, and oil, and wax—burners, lamps, Chinese lanterns—kept blazing, you would think, not only for the benefit of heaped-up needlework, but for the demoralisation of bargaining buyers. Inflammable streamers among the lights were swayed by the heads of tall people; and the men wore their hats. The heat was extraordinary. Old Ezra perspired at the bran-tub, though others dug for treasure. Louis on a chair, with his head against the ceiling, perspired as he held up tickets for the raffle. The minister whom aunt Selinah loathed stood helpless, hedged in by a widow and five old maids, perspiring a smile. The sales-women, Joyce and her mother among them, could not move, and lost all count of what was bought

or paid for. In the crowd there were people who never reached the stalls, and women who fainted. It was a great success.

It owed something to the side-shows.

There was a weird arrangement called a grotto in the little external cellar occupied by heating apparatus. You went down seven stone steps, and stooped. There was a collection of Fijian curios, small but edifying. There was a male fortune-teller with a black false beard, whose success was due to the fact that he knew every one and every one knew him. There was, finally, a scene from "The Rivals," harmlessly performed on a stage twelve feet by six; a scene in which the borrowed costumes were superb, the action of necessity simple, and the elocution primitive and Yorkshire. It had the effect of a solemn consultation.

George Marlowe found out Joyce the first evening, and, being unnoticed in the scrimmage, offered to take out something into the crowd and sell it there.

This proved amusing. Everybody was in great good humour, and he went on selling; rewarded, as he brought back the money, by Joyce's commendations. Louis observed him from the chair with a touch of vertigo. He would have been still more disturbed if he had learned, as the sale continued, that George was there in the afternoons, receiving more of his reward. What could Joyce do but chat with him?

He "brought forth fruits meet for repentance" every night; and neither she nor Mrs. Merrall denied him a share in their stall's honours, when it was found to have had the largest takings. He became a theme of pleasant gossip among the other ladies. Some, indeed, of Joyce's age were not unfriendly to him; and, a certain amount of flirtation being within the scheme of such occasions, George was happy.

Joyce felt no jealousy, but her interest in him deepened. There were girls of whom she disapproved. She sometimes took him from them, and so in a mothering way was nice to him.

Mrs. Merrall wondered if she ought to feel uneasy; but, with Aunt Selinah, to wonder was to act.

In a vain attempt to right things, the excellent woman enjoyed herself. "Well, young man," said she, electrifying a youthful group, "you seem to be at home."

George, who did not know her well, stared casually, and said some funny thing in an undertone, aside. Perhaps it was "Old geezer."

Aunt Selinah took him sharply by the shoulder, and spoke in a stage whisper. "Do go and look at the grotto!" said she: which pleasantry confused him. A giggle in social intercourse is worse than a hiss at the play. The boy's vain head went round.

"Thanks," he said, recovering. "Did you make it yourself?"

"Dear, no!" she replied, with a wonderful calm. "I made a cradle, if you'd like to see it. But they want a good-looking boy to take the coppers for half-an-hour, while somebody else has tea. You'll oblige, I'm sure."

He went like a lamb, and Aunt Selinah quite forgot him for the day there—or said she did.

"But, my dear Joyce!" she exclaimed, when told this was too bad, "Jacob served fourteen years for Rachel. Who's going so cheap nowadays?"

She had not done with him. On the following day she introduced him promptly to the minister.

"You've survived! They tell me you were calling out like the boy in 'Casabianca.' Mr. Larkins, come here; I've found you a treasure. Let me make Master Marlowe known, he has been neglected. This is the young gentleman who kept the grotto all night."

The Reverend Samuel Larkins expressed delight, and George respectfully thanked him.

"I want you to watch over him, and talk to him nicely. Will you? Take him into a class of some sort, and get him into our ways. He isn't at all particular what you do with him, so long as he feels useful."

"Well, I—I'm really in Leeds," gasped George, and

began, with a hunted look, to pull at his small moustache.

"Then send him round with a placard-board!" she pressed. "I don't know why our Stephen thinks him out of place: he's ornamental! I'll take him up myself. Tell them to put a piece of rope on that board at the door. It'll make a talk!"

Being a dull, conventional man, Mr. Larkins smiled and lost his chance. His smile was bent on George, patronisingly indeed, but asking his consent.

George said in a fright, "I'm helping Mrs. Merrall."

"Oh, never mind our stall; we shall do," she bustled. "This is for the whole bazaar! So few would dare to do it, but you've got cheek. And why not? Pray why not?"

The colloquy was heard, in the quiet room, by all who were near the door where she had caught him entering. She took them into it. The only serious face he saw was Joyce's.

"Why shouldn't our young friend go out with a bill and a handbell? It's such a novelty! In a quiet place like this it'll wake things up." She turned again to him. "Think about it, if you don't feel calm and bright—I mean if you feel at all modest. Talk it over. Anything for the cause at these times!"

There is no room for doubt that, if the formidable dame had really meant him to do it, he would have

had to take out that board, whether he brought it back or not. She preferred, however, to slip the idea and let it dog him.

Her humour was too rough. It drove him away, indeed, but it put Joyce upon his side; for she could laugh at nothing that gave pain to another, and believed him to mean well. She was deeply shocked and hurt, in fact. Aunt Selinah seemed to be doing wanton harm, and terrible harm. When George declared that he couldn't stand teasing, and wouldn't take it from anybody, Joyce made a sympathetic little speech, that drew them together and touched his philandering with a note of sincerity.

"Please don't mind," she said. "It's aunt's way with everybody, and I—I think you've behaved splendidly."

"I did it for you," said he, near crying with vexation.

"I know," said Joyce.

CHAPTER XV

AN ADOPTION

THE mill was empty in the dinner-hour, but Louis and Stephen sat in the office.

The blind manufacturer had eaten his mid-day meal alone there for three days, and on two days Louis had known of it. His doing so was not indeed entirely strange; in times of pressure he dined in the office often, while Louis, who lived near by, slipped out to his mother's table; and now there was the bazaar, which hindered Joyce from bearing her father company. But business did not press now. What kept him there solitary? Mere disinclination for the walk, and the deserted table at home?

On the fourth day Louis brought his own dinner, ashamed and nervous, but unable to bear suspense any longer. Whether Joyce cared for him or did not, he must speak.

Stephen had a sense of triumph, the finer because he had not forced things. He was genial in a very charming way. "Well," said he, when dinner and business talk were ended, "you haven't told me, Louis, how you enjoyed yourself at Bradford."

But this too easy lead, no less than the absence of

all reproaches on his two days' shyness, put Louis to confusion.

"I came to speak about that," he said, when his tongue would answer. "I ought to have done so before you. . . . before I agreed to take . . . before Joyce . . ."

And then—Stephen laid a quiet hand upon his arm.—

"My dear Louis," he said, his voice a little unsteady, "you are telling me what I know quite well, and have thanked God for already. You love our Joyce, don't you?"

He heard the quick-drawn breath of Louis's emotion, and gave him time; but Louis fought in vain with it, and broke down inarticulate with hope and gratitude. "I can't!" he cried. "It's too much . . . I've felt as if . . ."

"Ah," said Stephen, disregarding this, "you thought you could hide it! But I'm not so blind as some folk fancy." And then, as Louis recovered himself, he pressed his anxious question. "Well? Haven't you anything to tell me?"

"Have I spoken, you mean, to Joyce?"

"Yes. I know, of course, we've had no opportunity for talk. The bazaar——"

"Oh, no, I didn't speak to her! Surely you don't think——"

"Of course, of course!" The relief was extraordinary. "Forgive me. Upon my word, Louis, I'm getting foolish! You see, I thought she would have wanted you to tell me . . . Yes, of course; you came to me first. Well, well!" He applied his handkerchief to smarting eyes.

"You 've no idea, Louis, what it is to me to hope that I sha'n't entirely lose her. We fathers are selfish. I may keep you both, you see."

They exchanged a long hand-clasp.

"Well," said Stephen, having regained his calm, "I can't put you through the wood, you know. Joyce likes you very much, as she is bound to do, bound to do. But, of course, we shall see. . . . I hope you'll make a better hand of it than you did with me, Louis," he smiled. "And don't lose time. To-morrow's Saturday: come up in the afternoon."

Louis hesitated.

"Yes, I'll come up," he said despondingly; "but I know already that . . . she doesn't love me."

"You know? How do you know any such thing?"

"At Bradford . . . She was telling me I ought to get married."

"Well, that's a good one for you! She loves nobody else, at all events; I can tell you that. Joyce and I are almost like one mind, you know."

The heartsease of that, as it banished jealousy, was blissful.

"I never had such a task in my life," Stephen ran on, "as not to begin your wooing for you, when I found you out the other day . . . Louis, I'm the happiest man in England. God bless you, my dear fellow."

And then, in spite of all, the diffident wooer trembled.

"Don't be vexed," he begged, "if I can't manage to come to the point at once. I've thought . . . not to startle her, Stephen. That's why I'm glad you didn't speak to her; because . . . to please you, she might have accepted me even if she . . . she couldn't be happy."

Stephen helped him none at all in this; indeed, he paled a little, and after a pause assented. "Yes, I thought of that," said he. "Love must be free, I know, and you must judge when to broach it. But don't lose time. Don't."

They shook hands again.

"You're more than a father!" said Louis, choking.

"Well, well," said Stephen. "You'll be my son, Louis, however it goes."

Whereupon, being Englishmen, they promptly talked of other things.

CHAPTER XVI

IN THE WOOD

Poor Joyce's feet were among the snares. The worst that Stephen feared for her was brought about by his sister's want of tact.

On the closing day of the sale, George Marlowe's absence troubled her. She forgot him, indeed, in the last exciting hours, when zeal ran high and her father sat behind the stall as treasurer, to wait for the counting up; but as they all reached home at midnight, a heaviness new to her spirit and strength oppressed her. Even then, she did not know the cause of it. But George, unworthy, was remembered now in her prayers; and, before she slept, her pillow was wet for him. He was going back to Leeds discouraged roughly, and she had not been able at all to help. It seemed a sort of tragedy.

Joyce awoke anxious to see him at least once more; and this anxiety was to play at cross-purposes with Louis's first approach.

It was fretful and urgent, the time that remained being short. The day was Saturday. On Saturdays,

her father claimed her, but she resolved to speak of it as soon as he came home. Her distress was extreme, therefore, when he only looked in to say that he had a call to make, and make alone. She proposed to go with him.

"No, dearie, no," he said at the door. "I shall be back in half-an-hour. Stay and talk to Louis till I come."

In this mood Louis found her; and it chilled him with a little shock of misgiving, lest a word about his suit had been slipped out at unawares—possibly by her mother. The slightly fevered note of her talk, her heightened tinge of colour, appeared to say she was bidden to entertain him, but hoped he would not speak. The bazaar, of course, was her subject.

"Isn't it fine? Seventy pounds more than we expected! I think they're going to increase Mr. Larkins' stipend, if the new chapel doesn't cost too much. I was dreadfully tired, but oh, I did enjoy it! Didn't you? I saw you selling tickets: why didn't you ever come and speak to us?"

"You were so thronged," said Louis.

"Oh, weren't we! How we took all that money I can't think. You know George Marlowe: he came and helped us."

The directness ought to have told him, as plainly as

her face did, that Joyce could mean no stab; but sometimes love deceives men cruelly.

"He took things and sold them. I'm so sorry for him! Aunt Selinah was very unkind; she made fun of him, and then he stayed away. He means so well, poor George, and now—and now——"

Her brimming eyes were the death of Louis's hope.

"He won't know what to think, and perhaps he may not come to chapel. I wish Dad would send for him: it all happened in connection with our stall. She teased him shamefully, and I think we ought to let him know that it wasn't meant, don't you, Louis?"

He forced himself to say, "Your aunt scares *me*." He rose at the same time, and grasped the chair-back as he looked down at her, seeing her vaguely.

"I'll come in again to-night," he said. "Tell your father. Will you?"

Her indifferent "Very well, Louis," was a parting word of doom to him.

Stephen, finding him gone, was aghast. As the blind man entered Joyce had said, "Oh, Dad, I'm so glad you're back again; I've something to tell you!" and, until she had been speaking some time, he did not understand.

She told him nothing new, of course, except the little conversation at the stall before George Marlowe disappeared. But this compassionate concern, and

the suggestion that he himself should make amends to the lad, filled Stephen with intense anxiety for her.

He put out the hand she was not holding, found the mantelshelf, and steadied himself.

"I know you don't like him," she said, "and if—if you think it's all right, dear Dad—I mean, if you'd rather not speak to him, I Oh, Dad, I nearly ran out in search of him!"

Stephen went down upon one knee, to put his arms about her as she sat.

"My darling, so unhappy?" he said. "You make your old dad afraid for you with that soft heart of yours. Listen, dearie. We must get you some one better than me and your mother to care for."

She had started.

"Please, please, Dad!" she begged, recovering. "You're quite mistaken, indeed, you are; oh, yes, I could almost laugh at you, but it's too sad to hear you talk so! You don't really think I—I'm likely to be in love, do you? With any one but you?"

"Sweetheart, no." He raised her hand and kissed it. "I only wish you were. I don't know that I fear your falling in love with young George Marlowe, but I do fear your taking so much interest in him. I hear queer stories of him, Joyce. I won't tell you what they are, but I would give a good big share of what I

possess if you could forget him, dearie. Remember that none of us, by ourselves, can do very much towards making others better; that depends upon so many things. Women have sacrificed their happiness and given their lives even—given themselves—all to no purpose. The best women are most in danger of that kind of wasted heroism. So before you turn martyr, darling heart, you should know on what altar you're going to sacrifice my ewe lamb."

With an impulse infinitely reassuring, she took his head quietly between her hands and kissed his cheeks and brow. "Never fear, dear old Dad," she said. "Yes, I know what that means. You insist on sacrifice all the same, it appears. I haven't any right to accept it. No, some day you will marry, Joyce, if you please me; and what I fear about George Marlowe—— But you're smiling, aren't you?"

"Indeed, I'm not, then!"

"Well, it's just that he's sure to make you miserable, and he doesn't deserve it. Can you believe me about that?"

She looked very wistful and perplexed.

"Yes. I believe you, Dad," she said at once. "But——"

"But what?"

"I should like to do what I can for everybody,

always!" Her tears again were ready to flow. "Isn't that . . . right?"

It was what he had taught, as well as what she felt spontaneously and beautifully.

"Why, yes," he said, but sighed in saying it. "Only we mustn't be too anxious about results, you know. Why, you're crying, I declare!"

She battled with the distress, which came of being at outs with him ever so little.

"It's only that he . . . if he loves me, Dad, I. . . ." And then his arms came round her again.

"You're not responsible for *that*," he said, in his normal tone of cheerfulness. "That's nothing strange or very touching, is it? Why, what a life you'd lead if there were half-a-dozen George Marlowes about! Or would you learn to treat them sensibly?"

He caught a sound that ought to have been a laugh, and she dried her tears.

So this was why Louis had not managed to speak—or been able to stay with her! Stephen longed to say a word for him, but did not know how to begin without saying all. Perhaps this was not the time. He had pressed her far enough, he thought; and presently he kissed her and rose, trying to think that all was well. But the final happy word seemed wanting.

While he sought it, Joyce clasped him about the

neck. She had to assure herself that no shade of difference remained between them.

"I've been terribly naughty, dear old Dad, haven't I?" she said. "And I believe I drove away poor Louis!"

He was sure of her once more, and smiled, immensely happy.

"You'll see poor Louis again," he said tenderly. "You've been distractingly kind to somebody else, that's all, dearie."

If only the mischief done might have been repaired at once! She was so kind to Louis in the evening, that, in his eyes, she accused herself! He got no comfort from it.

Stephen divined, and found a word for him, going to the door to speak it. He laid a hand on Louis's shoulder as they bade good-night.

"Wait," he said.

CHAPTER XVII

THE LEVELLER

AFTER leaving Joyce in the afternoon, Louis had met George Marlowe bound for the station, carrying a bag.

The hope sprang up in his mind then, for what it might be worth, that Ousenup had seen the last of George for at least another twelve-month. Stephen's word "Wait," therefore, which only meant "You'll understand in a day or two," agreed with his own too modest mind, now fearful, no less than with that expectation. He waited, as he had thought he must. If even her thoughts of George were only kind, as Stephen's word to him would say they were, he wished to see some sign of love before he spoke outright.

She, too, thought to see no more, perhaps, of George Marlowe. She did not much lament that prospect, or waste more tears upon him; but he had taken a romantic place in her mind. She entertained for him that kindly feeling which we have for persons who are "not understood;" and she did

sometimes wish, at all events, that somehow she might hear how George was getting on. Her uncertainty as to his state of mind had always some distress in it.

Louis loved her: she was more affected by the fact that George had said he did. That was the romantic circumstance. As to Louis, it only seemed to her that he was more than ever gentle and friendlike. He had been both while his behaviour had still no greater meaning.

Things were in this posture when Marlowe senior died of an apoplexy.

The shock of his death—its suddenness, the fact of its being the first death important for any one well known to her, and most of all the fact that George had lost a father—struck Joyce very painfully. She did not know, and could not imagine, how different a man this father had been from hers. In talk with Louis, she showed a sharp and ingenuous pity so like love, as well as akin to love, that for the second time Louis Knight despaired.

George came home. He came not only to bury his father, and ostensibly to carry on the manufacture of manures, but, as it proved, to hang about in idle expectation of the old man's money.

When this was understood, the wiseacres found it easy to tell George Marlowe's dutiless and foppish

"fortune." Aunt Selinah surpassed them. She was at once so wise and so injudicious as to tell it, in Joyce's presence, while George's father lay unburied. He had died well-to-do—later on, he turned out to have been worth £12,000 in money saved—and that, it seemed, was enough for Aunt Selinah.

"Of course, such a sudden death is very shocking," she allowed, "if you think you know where he's gone, Stephen. I don't say. He was a good sort, a vast deal better than some who make more show. Give Peter Marlowe his due; he was worth a dozen of that impudent young puppy George!

"No," said Stephen as she paused, "I don't know where he's gone, Selinah."

"I know my faults, and I trust they'll be overlooked. So with Peter Marlowe's. I've said hard things about him, I daresay, but I do realise that I'm mortal. Some people want to gabble at the judgment seat. Not you, Stephen, I know. So I leave it. About his money I'm more concerned. If he's left very much of it to Young Hopeful, mark my words, you'll see a bonny come-down. He'll waste the old man's thrifty substance in riotous living."

"Oh, how can you say so!" cried Joyce, and flushed at her own temerity.

Aunt Selinah gasped. To be checked by her niece was startling. She eyed her with a bridled

indignation, and answered, "¡Well! I can say it; and your colour becomes you better than to stand up for him, Joyce. At least, that's my opinion. I don't know what your father thinks."

"Joyce is like you, Selinah; she doesn't care to hear her friends run down," Stephen said adroitly. "We want the lad to have his chance, at any rate. Eh, Joyce?"

"Oh, put him on horseback!" said his sister with a sniff. "By all means. But if I'd been Peter Marlowe I wouldn't have left him a penny piece. Young dandy! He'll be *some* poor girl's calamity, as sure as he marries or doesn't marry. I hate dawdlers, expecially dawdling boys dressed up like that. He'll wear a crape band on his arm. Much he cares. I won't try to hurt your feelings, Joyce Merrall, but don't you have anything more to do with him. There'll be plenty of flies round the honey-pot."

George might be bad, but Joyce did not believe him heartless. She hoped for an opportunity of telling him how very sorry she was for him.

And be it said that Joyce was nearer the truth than her aunt. The unformed, foolish boy, coarse though he was and featherheaded, could feel a natural grief; suddenly George found out that he had liked his rough, indulgent father. He not only shed a good many tears. It looked as if Joyce might be right,

even, in cherishing hopes of him; for, during several months, his conduct was a satisfying instance of what we owe to our trials. Sobered by the fright death gave him, George went to chapel regularly, wore clothes appropriate to his case, and forgot the Moorcock.

It was a greater try for sincerity than he got credit for. If at last it wearied him, people should have considered how fickle and dull he was by nature, and how such a penance contrasted with his free life in Leeds. One view of fickleness is, that it represents a natural reaction under dull conditions.

To Louis, it was a perplexity and a heartbreak that Joyce took any interest whatever in such a vain, dishonest booby—such a tyke. Louis's glimpse of the youngster's seamy side became a rankling memory. He had kept it to himself; and when George first showed signs of grace, he was glad he had done so. Besides, Stephen had heard the truth from other sources. But ought not Joyce to know it? He had faith in Stephen, or he might have abandoned his own hopes in order to tell it her with a clear conscience.

Puzzled and alarmed, Louis might reasonably be. But George had become, in a sense, her hopeful *protégé*; and, by way of compensation, Joyce had the contrite boy's assurance that he "understood her sticking to her father."

With Stephen's leave, she spoke to him on the first Sunday after morning service : just a sympathetic word and a pressure of the dainty hand, beautifully mannered in a girl, and so sincere that he could not keep his tears back even in the road, with people looking on.

CHAPTER XVIII

KITCHEN POLICY

It was a friendly habit of the old gardener's to look in on Betty now and then, by way of managing a cheerful evening. He called her a famous lass. The designation seems a little strained, since Betty had passed her fiftieth year and was, in fact, a widow, with sons and a daughter married. But he meant it heartily. Yorkshire manners allowed it, and so did Betty's undiminished spirits. A grandmother, she might have passed for forty.

"If I were younger," he said in a pleasant hour, "eh? What? Thou'd wed me!"

"Thou thinks!" cried Betty, affecting a fine surprise. "Nay, owd uns for impidence, they allus say!" But she looked as pleased as Punch, he thought.

Ezra smoked his pipe by the chimney-breast and let her do the talking. They discussed the affairs of the household as full members of it. Or rather, she discussed and Ezra commonly assented.

It was "smoothing night." A couple of irons blocked his cheerful view of the ribs, except when

Ezra smoked his pipe and let her do the talking

Betty took one up and held it to her cheek a moment. But what then? He liked to watch her working!

"Ye've seen 'em yoursel' i' t' gardin," she was saying. "He niver taks his een frae off her. Why, it's tied to *be*. They've grown together, in a way o' speakin'; like our Sar' Ann an' Dave Feather workin' i' t' same loom-gate. Eh, but that capped me! It did. 'Mother,' she says, all of a sudden, 'what do yo' think? Dave Feather's agate o' courtin'.' 'Nay, niver!' I says. 'Who's he courtin'?' He'd walked our Sar' Ann out a time or two; but when she said, 'Me, mother,' as bold as brass an' laughin' at me—I niver did! 'Nay, Sar' Ann!' says I, an' sat in a chair an' roared. They leave home like nowght at all. They do. But I think Louis 'll hae to live i' th' house: for what Stephen Merrall ud do if she left him I cannot tell, can thou? Eh, no!"

"Ea," said Ezra, as she stopped to think, "I've seen 'em i' t' gardin."

Betty began to laugh at him, and clapped her iron down. "Why, yo' owd sleepy thing!" she cried, with a push at his shoulder, "what's t' use o' talkin' to the'?"

"Is ther' summat amiss?" he asked, removing his pipe.

"Amiss! Thou mun wakken up a bit. Did ta hear me tell of our Sar' Ann?"

"Ea, I did!" he said with spirit.

"What did I say about Louis, then?"

"Thou said he'd sleep i' th' house."

"I've na patience!" She took up the iron again.

"But I've seen summat else," said Ezra with a grave face, which she turned to contemplate. "I've seen her wi' George Marlowe."

"'Sha!" cried Betty, falling to work contemptuously. "She'll niver hae *that*. That's a shufflemuck. It's Louis she likes, an' what's to hinder? George Marlowe's brass is nowght i' t' matter, so-what thou thinks. . . . Wheere did ta see 'em, pray? At t' bazaar! Why, thou knows he geet turned out, wi' his tail down—ay. He comes no more to th' house, choose how it be! He'd like her weel enough, I dar' say; dogs like butter, but they are-not fed wi 't. Thou thinks Louis Knight's a poor man's lad. So wor Stephen Merrall a poor man's lad. Brass isn't more nor a man, let me tell the'. A lass 'at weds brass *wants* brass, an' that's not our Joyce."

Ezra had resumed his pipe. But, as a chance to explain seemed now to offer, he took it out of his mouth again.

"Thou talks varra weel," he said, judiciously; "an' I wish ther' were nowght no more nor what thou says."

She turned about with incredulous calm, prepared for anything. "Why, is ther' summat?"

"He sees her i' th' afternoons, out walkin'."

"What says ta!"

"I've watched 'em," said Ezra, with a slow defiant scowl, "three or *four* times."

"Nay, Ezra . . . What does ta mak' *on't?*"

It was for once in a while the old man's turn; and she did no work while he commented, but listened with a stare, her arms hanging.

"If I were younger I'd lame him. Ea, an' I'm goin' to Heaven if I can manish 't . . . He's gitten o' t' soft side of her, Betty."

"Now, then!"

Their simple consternation found no words more anxious. It turned at once to practical ends. What was to be done?

"Thou mun say summat tull 'er," said Ezra.

"Or Grace Merrall," Betty thought.

"If I knew how, I'd talk to Louis."

"For seur! He mun warn George Marlowe off."

"Nay," growled Ezra, "there'll be no feightin.' But I'd like him to spark up a bit. He must be waitin' while she's twenty-one."

"Eh! T-t-t-t-t!" went Betty. "I're wed at seventeen."

In the pause that followed, as she snatched an iron up, and rubbed and cooled it, Ezra pointed out the limitations of candour. "I munnot say 'at I

knaw he's after her. He'd happen not just like it."

The old boy's pipe was out, and his puzzled look annoyed her.

"Niver sit pimperin'!" she cried. "Thou'll git nowght said at all. Think on o' Merrall blind an' Joyce simple." Her plump face shone, and her eyes flashed. "I'd be at him mesel' for two pins! Gapin'! He's like thee sittin' afore t' fire, looks an' says nowght. It caps me to see lads feared o' lasses."

"They are not all," said Ezra, referring to Louis's rival.

"Well, it's this," she ran on eloquently, her voice rising: "If a lass doesn't knaw to give a sign, t' lad niver will. I could 'a' hed a dozen; ay, fifty! But Joyce is nobut a barne—sleeps wi' her cheek on her hand, she does, an' dreams o' fairies yet. Merrall's brought her up so. Afore she'll think, she'll fall to one 'at has no mense nor modesty. She's niver seen young chaps, to judge on 'em. She's a cade lamb, is t' lass. Her face tells that. She maks me cry to see her innocent-lookin' een. She does. I can cry now. Whativer her father lets her roam for, I cannot think."

An honourable tear dropped upon the linen, and was ironed out.

"Nay, Betty," said Ezra. "Cheer up, owd lass. I'll see what I can say."

About the usual hour when Louis left for home, he

knocked the ashes from his pipe and wandered out, to wait till the front door opened. He let no grass grow. Long pondered in his private mind, the duty had seemed too bold till Betty spurred him. But he had shaped a way of nicely doing it; and now, as Louis came out, his heavy, well-known crunch was heard upon the gravel.

"That you, Ezra?" Louis hailed.

"Ea."

He waited; and they went down the hill together. Considering this informal greeting—its friendliness and charm—they both were strangely silent. Conspirators, or poachers? Louis roused himself.

"You're poor company, Ezra."

"I'm down o' lurcher dogs."

Louis peered about him.

"Nay, it goes o' two legs!"

The old man gave the riddle time, and then said stolidly, "George Marlowe."

To his vexation, Louis made no remark on that. "He knaws what I'd be at," thought Ezra; "I'll let him ax." Sound tactics; for, the longer Louis held his tongue, the more he told. Speak he had to.

"Well?" he asked at length, too pleasantly. "What's George been doing?"

"Do yo' *care?*" snapped Ezra, and came to a stand upon it.

Louis felt no surprise. But he could not listen to gossip in such a case.

"No!" he answered roundly. And then, in a quieter tone, he said, "I know your meaning, Ezra; it's gradely kind. You're good enough to like me better than somebody else, and wish me well." In speaking, he had put his hand on the old man's shoulder; but he withdrew it, feeling the friendly sign quite spoiled by his own reserve. "But what he does," continued Louis, "is nothing to me, unless I were better liked by . . . by . . ."

"Now then!"

Ezra agreed at once (an accent on the second word conveyed it), and they walked on. But he had not done, by any means. He put a more important point deliberately.

"Hae yo' *axed* her?"

And Louis lacked the heart to push him off: respecting him. He answered, shame-faced, that he had not.

"Well," said Ezra at length, with gentle irony, "she'll not ax ye. But ivery man his awn way o' courtin'. When I wor young we axed 'em."

"It's no use, Ezra!"

The words escaped at unawares; but his bitter mood was eased by having said them.

"Now, do yo' *knaw* that?" the old man urged.

'I've seen George Marlowe walkin' her out; but he looked full down i' t' mouth, Louis."

"Yes," said Louis. "I think I know it."

"Aw! Ye'll niver blame yoursel', then. . . . She's made her choice an' hed but one to pick frae."

Louis's mind misgave him dismally. He waited; but this old mentor was clever enough to say no more.

The night was close. They climbed the other hillside labouring, the younger man no less than his companion; and as they reached his mother's door Louis, with a shaking hand, wiped his brow of a great perspiration. There they stood. It was Ezra who waited now, with a certain grimness in his way of looking up the road; and suddenly Louis decided.

"She shall have a plain choice," he said. "Good-night, Ezra. And thank you."

CHAPTER XIX

GEORGE MARLOWE BARGAINS

BUT Louis Knight had let two golden months go by.

What is this ultra-delicacy of good men's wooings that often stultifies them? How comes generosity to such a pitch that men will surrender what is not their own? To be so unselfish as not to hope!

All one can suppose for Louis is, that he came of a humble stock whose modest disinterestedness, felt most when the emotions were in play, had been quite disproportionately cultivated. He was too much at the opposite pole from the savage who subdues a sweetheart with his club. But the case is not uncommon. We need, it seems, a theoretical and practical school for lovers, where affairs of the heart might be taught safely and with a due sense of their importance, under a strict lady principal.

The corresponding course for young ladies would provide, no doubt, a set of maxims including two, which might have been serviceable to Joyce Merrall:

(a) Never admit an intimacy because you do not intend to marry.

(b) Never bind yourself conditionally. Say "We will see," or "I really cannot accept retaining fees."

Joyce's manner to George left nothing on which to reproach herself if ever he fell away from grace. She greeted him with her sweet, compassionate smile always—a little anxiously. The anxiety was due, not to a distrust of him sown in her mind by common report, but, first, to his looks—which seemed to tell of filial grief, or a woeful combat with the Enemy of Souls, or both—and afterwards to certain confessions he made to her. There was no fresh cause to doubt his sincerity of purpose: it was real enough, and touching. What he lacked was energy and application; but that defect showed later.

"It's hard," he said in the meantime. "When I think of myself going on all my life as I am, it seems a cruel affair, Joyce. Nobody to love, and my father dead and buried; what is there to live for?"

There were tears in his mournful eyes.

"Dear George! You forget what good you can do with all that money. Oh, I'm sure—I'm sure you will be happy." said his ardent comforter. "You must have seen how many people look miserable in Leeds. Please don't mind my saying this; but think what it might be to help them, and have them love you! Perhaps you couldn't spare a great deal, but to be able

to do something, however little—I wish I were rich whenever I go there!"

"Yes, if I weren't so miserable myself," said George.

"Try!" she urged. "Oh, I think there is nothing so good as making others happy. You wouldn't be miserable while you were doing that."

He muttered, "You won't make me happy."

This turn which he always gave to her pleading distracted Joyce; for certainly she did not love him.

"It is so difficult," she said, "to do one's duty—to everybody."

He kept silence.

"You said you understood. . . . Oh, you shouldn't ask me, George! If you understand, you should try to put me out of your mind."

"What, when I'm trying to please you? How is it likely, Joyce? When Mr. Larkins was preaching on Sunday, I was saying to myself all the time, 'It wouldn't alter things if I gave away every penny.' . . . I wish he wouldn't preach at me; I've enough to worry me in my own mind. I can't do *nothing* for thinking of you! You don't know what love is, I think. You can't, or else you'd see how it might turn me into wrong ways."

"Oh, no, no! Not loving me!"

"It might, easy. I nearly went back to Leeds yesterday."

They were approaching a point in the road where he generally left her. "Oh, what can I do?" she said. "You *shouldn't* try to make me think I'm to blame. It isn't fair, George."

"Well," said the rogue, sulkily, "you asked me not to give up. Why do you look so beautiful, if I'm never to think about you? Joyce, I do love you! It comes on me sometimes—if I'd a bit of hope at all I think I could hold on better."

Joyce drew herself up. "I'm *not* to blame!" she said. "I didn't make myself. I don't think I am beautiful. If what you say were true, I should hate myself."

A little cowed, he hung his head then.

"I begged you to be good for your own sake, not for mine at all."

"I know that."

"Yes, but I am sorry for you; and there's nothing I don't wish for you, George. If you knew how I'd cried—yes, I've cried for you!"

George looked up gloomily, dissembling his surprise.

"What hope can I give you? You know father needs me," she pleaded, "and how much I love him You—oh, you're unkind!" Joyce gave way to her tears, suddenly.

He let her alone until she mastered them. Then he said: "Well, will you give me a chance if you

ever change your mind? You won't always think as you do now, you know. I've heard girls talk before. I asked you first, and I *am* keeping straight, Joyce; I'm keeping as straight as a parson. I might be a good man, and do a lot, if I had you for a wife. I don't care for money; I'd give mine away like a shot; you shall do whatever you like with it, there! Look here, I'll go and ask your father myself, if he can do without you!"

"If you do that," said Joyce steadily, but with an astounding flash of the eyes, "I'll never speak to you again. . . . I shan't change my mind; but if it is any help to you I *will* promise that—that is, if you won't vex me, or ask anything more, or talk about love as if—as if it were a dreadful thing."

"That's agreed, then."

He held out his hand; and she took it in ratification of the light bargain—with an extraordinary sense of relief.

CHAPTER XX

TRUE LOVE'S MASTERY

Down the valley, thin woods growing on the hillside slopes were sere, nipped by the early frosts and burned by the sun of late September. A shedding of brilliant leaves burnished the ground there, strewn among bracken and blackberry canes. Even to Wake House, the colour blazed a mat gold. "In her long nightgown sweet as boughs of May," Joyce looked out new slept; and saw it in sunshine over a level mist that hid the bottoms. She had an inspiration: the blackberries must be ripe.

It was her father's day, but he had a guest. Like a person of practical sense, but at heart most impatient, she did her morning's work, and then suggested blackberry jam!

The inspiration had been idyllic. Her mother talked prose. "Take Louis to help you," she said, and bustled across to the kitchen door with some intention. "It's no use bringing a basinful."

Joyce opened her eyes. "Mother! Louis gathering blackberries!"

"I'll warrant he will. What nonsense!" The best diplomacy is that which seems too blunt to hide a ruse. "Ezra!" Grace called out. "You've nought to do. Go down and ask Louis if he can help us to get a boiling of blackberry."

It is one thing to follow a bright caprice, another to set out seriously on business. With Louis, although she liked him well, the business looked quite formidable; and as for his own grave share in approaching it, there is a couplet of Matthew Arnold's which describes him—he was thinking of a business more tremendous—

> "Tasks in our hours of insight willed
> May be in hours of gloom fulfilled."

By an effort of courage that gave him the air of offering bedside comfort, he kept this gloom from Joyce's eyes. Not one delusion aided him, except that George was loved. Condemned unjustly to be hanged, he might have attained the same mild mood in prospect of a formal protest on the scaffold. Joyce found herself thinking it Sunday, and took to throwing little stones for Rags.

That helped him in a moment. She laughed at Rags so buoyantly that George's sins were plainly not on her mind.

Her beauty smote him, as if for months he had not considered it closely. He kindled. The sun on

her hair and joy-lit face caressed her for some queenlier fate than marriage with that clod.

What fate, he did not timidly ask himself: his thought as he watched her was only admiration. His own face glowed: Joyce caught the altered mood in it and flushed emboldened. Rags clamoured and leapt. As when alone, she lent herself to his romps, cried encouragements, called him silly old dog, patted him, roughed his coat, and at last ran free beside him.

For Louis it was a revelation. He had not so imagined her at any time. He followed not knowing whether he ran or walked, did not breathe or breathed, was himself or nothing. She was some blithe spirit, yet known to him; and, overtaking her, he caught her breathless, astonished, himself not less so. His arm was about her waist.

"Oh, Louis, I didn't think you—you'd do that!"

What light in her eyes!

"You made me," said he.

And at once she was grave; glad, so glad as to be afraid of herself—not of him at all. He had freed her; she checked the big word upon his lips; and they walked on, hearing each other breathe, not aware of the dog's barking.

Louis recovered first and threw him a stone far down a field below the road. "Ah, you make me

live!" he said, trembling. "Do you know what I owe you, Joyce?"

She drank in his joy with her eyes, and shrank from it.

"Nothing; nothing!" she said quickly. "You mustn't think of anything for me." A great sense of humiliation, indefinable, abashed her.

He was silent for a long time, it seemed to Joyce. What unkind meaning had she expressed? The words had sprung to her lips with a vague thought not unkindly felt, but kindly. Had he meant *that?* Louis!

"Why not?" he asked.

His voice told her plainly she had hurt him, and she could not say why not!

"I think," she faltered, "I meant . . . you are always doing things. . . . You're not offended, Louis?"

"No. At you? Nothing you can ever do will offend me." But he hung his head.

"Or—hurt?"

"I mistook you, then?" As he spoke, he glanced with eyes that shrank from hers.

"What did you think I meant?"

"I thought," he answered, almost voicelessly—whatever it was, he thought it still, she knew—"You meant I . . . I mustn't talk to you like that."

"Oh, no! You can't offend me either."

He forced a smile. "That would have hurt me."

"Dear Louis!" she murmured, contrite.

And that was a kiss for his heart, which bounded, beat tumultuously. The joy of it thrilled him, overwhelming thought. He stopped. Joyce was surprised again as he took her hand—and then, for certain, she divined. She divined with a great shock of trouble, and drew the hand ever so little away.

So little though it was, he let her fingers go; but he said the words!

"Ah, I love you, Joyce. Will you let me?"

Joyce was very pale; went very cold.

"Louis, please don't say that! Please. Oh, I am so sorry!"

He looked bewildered; then he bowed to it.

"It's my fault," he said. "I misunderstood."

A moment later he raised his eyes with a certain firmness, although his lips, like hers, were white. "But I should have told you, anyway—not to ask you to love me, but just to let you know. . . . Everybody loves you. See, there's old Rags!" The dog was licking the hand Louis had relinquished.

Louis stooped and patted him, and so contrived to cover his emotion. Hers had been too piteous. But grief blinded him, and at his heart a knife cut barbarously. His mind grew dull with the pain.

Joyce did not find a word to say. Her feeling was, that she had done the cruellest thing in all the world;

she had done it to Louis; and she could not help it, or soften it. Pity—or was it not more than pity?—ached within her like something hard and fiery. For she could very well have fallen at his feet, he was so splendidly kind.

"Another stone, old chap?" said Louis. "Where's that I threw? Eh? Where is it? Bring it, good lad!"

Rags was happy, at any rate. He frisked, and whined, and leapt at the wall for another downhill gallop. When Louis said "Bring it," he pointed out the stone with his nose.

Louis threw with all his might, and cleared his eyes while watching the old dog run.

"You know," she said, tremulously, "that I want to stay with my father, don't you?"

That had not been his interpretation.

He heard her as if some shutter had been thrown back, flooding a room with light. He was dazed; then greatly ashamed.

"Forgive me!" he faltered. "I shouldn't have spoken if I'd known that, Joyce." How well he thought it, now, that he had resigned her, leaving her quite free! He would not have spoken, truly: "But you . . . you don't mind," he dared to smile; "do you?"

Her beautiful glance fell; the blood came back

to her face. "Oh, Louis, you make me feel too proud!" she said.

She made an avoiding step, and they went forward. How sweet she was! Womanly! Oh! and he should not lose her! As the turmoil of his mind abated, he chilled a little at the prospect of sharing her nunlike life, with the death of hope for him; but it was the chill of adoration, a feeling almost religious—adoration still glad and very pleasant, because his saint had heard and answered, knew his heart and walked beside him.

When the true lover has thought there is no bread, he says his grace devoutly over half a loaf.

"Here we are at the wood," said Louis. "Nay, it's all over, Rags, for you. This is our turn."

Joyce's admiration for him humbled her to something small, very unworthy; he had won her. Because she could not give him herself, he had her heart, which ached to serve him, to give him pleasure, to prove by some undiscoverable means her gratitude and modesty. She could not speak much; she was held by a queer sense of the scene's unreality. Her dominion over a man, over Louis, whom she had always set so high, seemed strange and doubtful. But all that she wished to say appeared in her look and in her gentleness.

Not indeed so legibly that his mind understood

it. There was no need of that. Pride and a high sweet pleasure kept his heart thrilling, and made the sun-clear autumn wood a paradise. Was Adam expelled from Eden? His race may still return to it. Eden is there wherever they find the mate ordained.

But, as the old fable tells, it is not properly a place of labour. Grace Merrall exclaimed at the meagre crop of fruit there, forgetting that; and then, as she scanned her daughter's face, she did remember.

Stephen sat at a loss with his hand on her shoulder

CHAPTER XXI

A DISENTANGLEMENT

STEPHEN MERRALL heard of the two impossible contracts together, and with extreme anxiety. His guest, an old friend home from New Zealand, had occupied him wholly during three days, or he might have been of some avail.

So he told himself. Yet whether or not he could help Joyce now, or could ever have helped her without a strong constraint upon her freedom, her sense of honour and kindness even, he trembled to find himself not sure. It was incredible that she should have thought so lightly of the word given to George Marlowe. At all costs she must take that back.

Her obstinate loving purpose towards himself, so firm that she had made a conditional promise as if it were nothing, could only be discouraged now when she was freed of that promise.

Joyce knelt still at his knee after a scene of much emotion, and Stephen sat at a loss, with his hand upon her shoulder. She was gazing at the blind face. It told her less of his thought than he had let picked

words express; but what she knew and divined was enough to wound and alarm her. She had brought her proofs of love to him very shyly, and he had not been able to conceal that he was startled, hurt, immensely solicitous. What troubled her was not his unselfishness, not at all the clash of generosities between them, but the fact that, longing to please, she had only mortified him, done miserably wrong, it seemed.

"About George, it isn't as if I'd said I might marry him, Dad," she urged tearfully. "You don't think I would ever do that, even if you weren't my very dearest? I couldn't. Oh, never!" She declared it with a convincing shudder.

"You see, my dear," said Stephen, "you told him very rightly that you weren't to blame for his miseries. But, now, look. Suppose you ever had to say to him, 'I've changed my mind about marrying, but I can't marry you.' He wouldn't behave so well as Louis did. He'd say, 'Oh, but you promised to give me a chance, Miss Merrall:' or does he call you Joyce? 'You can't break your word in that way. I've waited for you. All this time I've been trying to be a good boy—to be a good young man—because I had hopes.' Eh? Not to blame, then, dearie?"

Joyce was frightened. She checked his fondling

of her hand; the playfulness of reproach was too bitter.

"Yes, but that won't ever happen," she said.

He remained so long silent, however, implying dissatisfaction with her assurances, that she asked him what he thought she ought to do. Only too gladly would she hear of a way out!

"Can't you tell him what I've said? Not that I said it, but that you've thought things over, Joyce, and wish to be released?"

She considered this, and her answer was given in a low tone, nervously. "I don't know what he'd do." At heart, she was afraid of the pleadings George might urge afresh. "But if you think so, Dad . . ."

A reflection struck doubt into his mind too. George Marlowe would suspect a rival suitor; and there was one. Coarse fibred, perhaps he would drive her to pledge herself strongly against Louis.

"I'm afraid you must," Stephen said nervously, "if you are ever to be rid of him."

"But I . . . I daren't leave him quite to himself."

He smiled. "No, no, dearie. We'll see about that, of course. But I've a little plan, if you won't think me too meddlesome. Would you—darling heart, I hate to seem mistrustful; I'm not so of your mind at all, but only of his breeding—would you like to speak to him here, with me?"

Joyce sprang to put her arms about his neck and kiss him. "Oh!" she exclaimed, "how good you are, dear old Dad, and wise! You know just what I feel. He says things to me that I . . . he ought not to say, I think. And as he means—You do think he means well, *now?*"

"He'll surprise us all, no doubt," Stephen allowed. "I admit I didn't expect so much of him. But, my dear, I hope you're not very vain of these 'results.' He had a shock, you know."

The drawback of being excessively kind to ill-bred people is that one may have to snub them, however greatly kind people hate that necessity. The kind prefer being put upon, as far as possible; and Joyce grew extremely nervous as the time came.

Not so the unfortunate Clod. An invitation to tea at Wake House brought him in the happiest good humour. He shone. To be quite fair to him, he had taken pains with his toilet; and the effulgent show he made was due as much to pomatum, and to a diamond scarf-pin, as it was to his innate cheerfulness —set free from previous care by this occasion. His excusable inference had been that Joyce, who penned the note, was making all smooth with her awful father for him. That, he allowed gratefully, was A1 at Lloyd's, copper-bottomed. Himself a mutable soul, he did not doubt this change; and his

respect for her, a real and most unusual sentiment towards any girl in George's mind, increased as Joyce appeared to act in his behalf.

I confess to a lively compassion. We must all aspire, or we perish. He had begun rather low; but the spice of sordid feeling in his suit, keen yet not all greedy, had been lost in the prospect of £12,000 in his own right. To the extent of his capacity, the Clod was now in love with Joyce Merrall, as well as with her charms.

He greeted her with a look sincerely grateful, her mother with evident pleasure, her father with such new deference that Stephen felt sorry for him. Joyce quailed. He, meanwhile, felt a general sympathy that warmed him. Stephen tactfully administered a little coolness at table, and then poor Joyce, being more at ease, grew gravely critical—a new thing with her.

Life's little ironies beset him. He had walked into a hornet's nest of them. She understood by love a greater and other thing than he, and missed some signs of his devotion. There was a deft little twist of hair upon his forehead, such as used to be called a love-lock. He had arranged it with much care; it looked, alas, like vanity. The downy fringe on his lip, a decoration of manhood worn with confidence, made her wonder how he kept it growing like eyebrows

upside down. He talked about the funeral. His consoled appreciation of its honourable detail bewildered her. Was there really some comfort for him in the fact that four horses drew the hearse, "with those things on their heads," or that the coffin was "oak, silver plated, the best they could do?" When asked if he liked business, he answered that there was as much money made as he cared for. He meant this magnanimously: it sounded otherwise. There was nothing, in short, the Clod could say or do acceptably, and yet he had no misgivings.

"They tell me you're a singer, sir," he said to his host after tea. "I should like to hear you, if you feel inclined for it."

There was an awkward silence for a moment, which Joyce broke herself, with unexpected courage.

"George, I've something to say to you," she began, her face aflame but her eyes quite steady. "I asked you to come because of that promise I made to you."

"Don't say another word, Miss Merrall," he interposed very gallantly and promptly. "It's for me to speak; and if your father thinks anyways well of me, now I've settled down and set up for myself, I'm sure I'm proud to make an offer. It isn't my fault——"

"But I want to take it back," said Joyce, "if you please."

The Clod sat speechless.

"I've not changed my mind about—about marrying, George, but I think you'll be happier if we are just ordinary friends. I . . . I shall like you better."

"My daughter thinks," said Stephen kindly, "that a conditional promise of that sort would not be quite fair to you, and might turn out badly. I think so too, though, of course, I hope she will marry. It is wiser for young folk not to bind themselves, however slenderly."

"You see," said Grace in turn, "Joyce doesn't love you. You'd no right to ask her such a thing, if you'd known that."

"George did know," Joyce explained, "but he wanted me to think it over."

His dull eyes, which had turned from one to the other, filled with tears, and a flush of shame and injury mounted.

"I can see how it is," he said. "You don't think I'm good enough. That's what you meant before, I expect." He pulled himself together, and avowed a sense of grievance. "It's a queer thing to be asked to tea for. Joyce did talk as if she liked me, and I made her a fair offer, better than some would, though I say so. . . . It's all nought, then?"

"Oh, don't say that!" Joyce cried, touched. "I shall always want you to be happy, always."

"'Tisn't much use, is it?" said the Clod.

Stephen replied to him. "Ah, that depends upon yourself. If you want my daughter to be happy, it should be of some account, I think."

He had not thought of that, it is fair to say, and he looked humbler.

"Well," he brooded, "I expect I ought to think myself well off. But I'll be going." He got up, and stood with his hands in his trouser pockets. "We can't all be happy. There's not much chance for me, any way."

Then his glance fell upon the blind man, and he said no more, but took his unaffected leave. Joyce was pale and shaken.

She did not soon recover her spirits.

CHAPTER XXII

PRINCESS AND PEOPLE

It was now most of all, if Stephen had known it, that he might have thanked a happy foresight for hiding the cause of his blindness. The interesting fact that Joyce Merrall did not mean to marry had gone through Ousenup.

In the public eye she became a romantic figure, a sort of Daughter of Mercy. She saw, without being clearly aware of it, a special kindness in the looks of her father's workpeople; not knowing why, she lived more than ever in a pleasant atmosphere. Had Joyce been supposed to perform a penance, this general sympathy and admiration must have had a mournful cast.

The news of her choice of life was accredited by a report that George Marlowe had "axed her and gitten No"—a report circumstantial but incredible. Ousenup believed the news, however, when George confirmed this story.

He did so at unawares, being only sounded as to his knowledge of Joyce's mind. But, as the matter was mentioned rather often, he understood that a

particular interest in her was imputed to him. George found this inquisition wearisome. He had some reason to be grateful to those who admired him least; for, thinking it likely enough that Joyce had made an excuse, they never troubled him.

Among the dalesfolk, Joyce Merrall was like a daughter of some minor king of Scandinavian story --served by their own forelders in another way. When Stephen called her fairy princess as a child, he dealt in the marvellous only as to fairydom. He was King of the Ousenupers. They knew what they owed to him, he what he owed to them, and King and subjects both discharged their obligations happily: which is more than happens in every larger empire. All that Queen Victoria won by making her home-life known to us, was his on the smaller scale. More was; for his kingdom knew no politics.

Imagine, then, the interest of this piece of news about a personage whom Stephen's people thought of proudly.

But, alas, for Arcady! When George's mother put it about to save poor George's credit, she had need of all Madame de Pompadour's *insouciance*. After that the Deluge. She not only made an error of tactics, but introduced politics; and, for George and the reigning house alike, the times grew troublous soon and later

George had his party. They made a Young Pretender of him. The chemical works and the Moorcock were hotbeds of a thriving treason, provoked by the scorn of the unco' guid for his sad ambition. His following wore no badge, while the Merrall wear was shawls and blue check smocks; but, like small factions everywhere, they made up in fervency what force they lacked in numbers. Against the Princess nothing was intended. But if some loyal feeling went the length of implying in George a want of quality, up with the flag and speak plainly: a Marlowe any day before a Merrall! She was a proud young thing, at any rate, and what was old Sam Merrall but a weaver?

From this time forward Ousenup was a kingdom divided against itself, for a fancied rivalry which had no actual spirit. There might be no bad blood; but then, all Ousenupers are easy-tempered. Piquant party names, like Blind Bobbin-winder and Muckspreeader, could not have been bandied everywhere in mere good humour.

The strife was masked by a fine facetiousness.

"How do?" said a Merrall with all the old urbanity, calm-spoken. "Hez your George plucked up at all?" And a Marlowe answered mildly, "Nay. But he will do. Yo' m' tell your Joyce we think so."

Or George's man spoke first, with an air of grim

anxiety. "I hear ye've putten a stop to courtin'." "Why, partly!" said the Shawl. Which admission was made a standing joke at the Moorcock. "We're no use, lads. They mean to dee off prattily."

A feud of the sexes never can be deadly; but this was much too playful for one hearer—the Young Pretender himself. He sat among old friends with a new dignity, and with some consequent reserve —a demeanour imposed alike by his late accession of wealth and standing, and by his known reform. Their warmth embarrassed him.

He withdrew from the sorry audience, and went next day to Leeds till popular feeling cooled. It is said that, by princes, the compensations of private life are specially valued. They must be precious in particular to disappointed princes. George had had a trying time. He did not guess what use his enemies made of the bazaar story, or Ousenup might have lost him. They said that it showed he was not wanted. They proved triumphantly, on that plain evidence, that George had been rejected on his merits, and Joyce had spared his feelings.

Aunt Selinah said so. She felt no doubt of it, and she was hugely pleased with her niece.

"What's this I hear, Joyce?" the dear old lady gushed, embracing her. "An affair? My dear child, there could be no hesitation; you're wiser than I

thought you. Rather than see you married to that bumpkin, I'd take vermin-killer. You'll do much better, don't you worry."

Disdaining impertinent gossip, Miss Merrall yet took care to give it a useful turn; and after-events found her at the head of a smart intelligence department. In point of fact, Aunt Selinah led the Shawls.

The secret of her statecraft was a system of minor beneficences of old standing. She had her sick and her poor, her weekly round of social duties among her brother's people. She was his almoner too. It is not easy to say whether he or this tart spinster enjoyed more popularity, or had the better right to it. She would sit up a night with any one, and her tact with fractious invalids was marvellous, like her vigour. Old Dr. Ambler prayed her aid in awkward cases. A crazy moorside farmer, down with pneumonia, refused to take his physic: the terrible nurse sailed in upon him suddenly, and told him he was dying. The man demurred, as she supposed he would; "there was over much to be done," he said excitedly.

"Well, you can't help that," said she. "What are you doing looking out of the window? Lie down."

She put him down by the shoulders and he began to cry. Then she demanded: "Where's your medicine?"

"I willn't hae no meddicine!" the patient broke out violently. "It's puzzom! I hae my belly *full* o' puzzom now!"

Aunt Selinah found the bottle, and drank while he gazed at her. "Yes," she said, "you're right. Poison it is. But this is a kind to poison your complaint: it won't hurt *you*, you fool. When did you take it last?"

He had omitted six doses, and she gave him three at once.

Her own old remedies were sometimes quite unpleasant, too; but she never failed to apply them. Jellies and soups and well-boiled chickens made amends. She cut out garments, wrote letters for the illiterate, patched up quarrels, said prayers for all who needed them, made wills.

What Miss Merrall thought had not at once the force of public opinion. So much may be owned. She was much too strenuous and harsh for the Yorkshire humour, which keeps a quiet eye on things, half-closing it like an artist; and it kept an eye upon her.

But, as a party leader, she was heartsome.

When Peter Marlowe's widow was asked to tea at Wake House, she could explain, with half a word, the motives of that kindness. To Peter's memory, he was acceptably charitable; may one say, she set

a pattern? But she called attention, at the same time, to those defects of character for which it was necessary to make the charitable allowance. His son appeared to inherit them, though indeed, Miss Merrall said, he had rather his timid little mother's way of creeping in and making himself agreeable. As to his addresses, she laughed openly.

"Oh, dear yes! We've 'put a stop to courting.' You can live to regret that nonsense, I've noticed."

Old Ezra put her claim to leadership very well when he said: "She's a rare hand wi' t' kettledrum. She brays th' heead in; but folk likes to hear her do 't."

"Well, happen so," said Betty, who had no cause to love her well. "Poor thing, she's niver hed bairnes to soften her."

That was very much the general praise and plain apology. Her followers paused just where she most pressed on, and Betty's further word was equally that of the party:

"Eh, but Joyce munnot grow to be like her!"

They said so as gravely as if Aunt Selinah were a horse thief, or a comedy actress.

CHAPTER XXIII

SLIPPERS AND A BEDQUILT

GRACE MERRALL began to knit a white bedquilt.

She did so almost without purpose, or, as Maeterlink sees the bees for ever toiling, with that sure instinct of self-sacrifice which he calls the Spirit of the Hive.

No one but she, not even the husband from whom she kept no secrets, knew what bed the quilt was meant for; this secret being rather felt than known, even by her. Joyce said she would not marry; the loving mother-spirit answered with a piece of labour. What then? She did not hope to lose her daughter. Without its younger queen the hive would make poor music, Stephen be doubly blind. She had no secret to tell him! He, too, supposed the day would come, and seemed to wish for it. She said nothing, then, but knitted square upon square. The older bees leave all to the younger. They quit the hive itself.

Stephen sat with a quiet mind, and in two younger voices thought he heard the future. He was entirely happy.

They spoke seldom, in the neighbourly evenings when his friends were there. It sometimes happened, even, that they said no more than "Good evening" and "Good night." Still he heard the future confidently, as if they refrained from talk in reverence for it.

Alone, he had great thoughts of it, race-proud, seeing his children's children and theirs after them. That endless boon and miracle set contemplation reeling. For his love admitted no misgivings. Kind hearts and loveliness, honest minds and manliness, were what he saw replenishing the earth.

His dear child's choice was now free, and he knew something more than she did; he knew that Louis was loved.

Stephen had that secret of his own, kept not from his wife indeed, but from his son to be, his foster-son; and he felt like the hatcher of some pleasant plot, who smiles with sly benevolence and pats his people on the shoulder. Let it work. Louis would make a fine discovery one day, and come to tell them of it; whereupon there might be cheerful things to see to. What about that partnership? That terrible responsibility? Chaffing speeches on it ran in his head:

"Now that you've stolen half the family, young man, have you any objection to my relinquishment of half the business?"

"You're uncommonly diffident, Louis; but pray

explain to me how you accept Joyce Merrall and decline a partnership?"

"Well, sweetheart, you'll lose your father's name, you know; but see if you can persuade that Louis of yours to let me keep it in the firm."

Joyce herself already tasted womanhood.

She was aware of a difference in the manner of her father's friends. They paid her more attention, sometimes asked for her opinion. It was embarrassing. In her case a secret of some sort appeared to be imputed. She had to overcome a shyness very strange to her, before she understood that this new dignity was an acknowledgment of her wise behaviour with George Marlowe; and, even so, she half-resented it. What had been done about George she approved, of course; yet it gave her no feeling that she merited consideration. Much otherwise.

But Louis's love was a new wonder at waking every day, and always the same thought came, that she owed him a duty of great kindness. She rose perplexed, her face looking sad in the glass, her pleasant unshaped idea of him forgotten in that concern. Yet, when he came, she was very happy.

Ought she to feel so selfishly? Compunction was inevitable, because he said so little to her. If he had talked as usual, she would not have questioned this pleasure which his presence gave.

Joyce resolved to make him a pair of woollen slippers, for the winter.

Working the slippers set her heart at rest. Smile, if you please; but sometimes, in the brightest nights, this sweet girl robbed herself of sleep to stitch them. Never again would a gift for him be consecrated so.

Fair thoughts went in with the stitches. Memories of Louis more than he had of her went in; and for any one of them, told by her musing lips, he would have waked a night himself, or a week of nights. Thoughts of mystery and life went in, hopes and sighs; thoughts of the silent house, moon and starshine, God's great goodness, prayer. The moon streamed in on her daintiness, reclined on pillows there, and wrapped with a shawl against the night-cold: incredible, if even he had seen the picture.

He saw her stitch by a better light, and grudged the work her eyes (which moonlight tried). But he did not grudge the slippers to her father—who was, of course, to have them! On seeing them first, he had said with a smile, "To him that hath shall be given," and three other people had smiled, being all in a secret together.

Joyce mistook his mildness for complacency.

She loved him for it; and doubts of it beset her only as she recalled, still wondering, the impulsive scene of his avowal. Indeed, he came more seldom to the

house now. She was sorry for that; but Louis did not let her think herself avoided. He was teaching languages and shorthand to five poor lads, who, out among the hills, had no fair chance of learning things commercial.

But Louis had found that expedient, it had not offered itself.

After the joy of seeing her came always such repining restlessness, that, very soon, he had perceived one thing clearly: the choice, for him, lay between life spoiled and life lived still more busily. To have told his love was no amelioration. He had been quieter-hearted in the days when he did not dare to aspire.

It was not alone that sweet recollections plagued him now—that he had held her once in his arms—but that now she was not so far aloof, so ethereal. She knew; and her merely grateful looks mocked his hopelessness. He must do and say no more now, but school himself to mortifications; and, while his mind accepted this, he rarely set out for Wake House without a reluctance at the heart of desire, a bitterness in sweet expectancy. That "worm i' the bud" was hateful, for it set him thinking too far forward. "Some day, some day," sang his hopes; and afterwards a melancholy passion cried, "How long?"

He lashed himself for a thought disloyal at once to his ideals, to Stephen, and to her. So he dutifully taught small classes.

This occupied him two nights a week. But the ordeal of going to see her was not to be faced on every off-night; he sat with his mother, reading aloud or sinking all his mind in chess problems.

Louis lived in an old grey cottage of stone, which had been built, as streets are paved, with an honest eye to durability. A row of three such cottages, gardenless and unæsthetic, stood in a place of wintry blasts indifferent to them. The doorposts and the windowsills were flat; the three squab chimneys measured fourteen inches high from the "rigging." This order of domestic architecture has no name. But, in respect of weather-proof merits, it is a distinct advance upon Kit's Coty House, which is more than can be said for certain later styles. A primary quality of any true house is, that it shall be lovable, and therefore trustworthy at least, with some look of permanence. Louis loved this undistinguished little stronghold, in which he had lived all his life.

Walls and roof and cocoa-nut-matted floor were stone alike, all quarried from the hill; and, within doors, it was comfortable. They had one room to live in, and two small rooms to sleep in. Downstairs, he could stand upon the floor and take down a flitch of bacon from the black oak rafters. Upstairs, he could only stand his height beneath the rigging aforesaid. The windows were small, an inheritance of the days

when light was taxed, or of Old Norse preference for warmth.

All they possessed was plain, not excepting the eight-day clock in a fluted case, and the trim chest of drawers, brass-furnished. In any but the rocking-chair, you sat upon naked oak. The walls were lime-washed; Louis renewed their coat of white once a year, donning his mother's apron and a paper cap. The chimney shelf held no ornaments, but only a brass inkstand, canisters, and two bright candlesticks. The pictures, naïvely chosen for some pleasant human interest, were a few engravings. A string of hanging bookshelves, a sampler, and a framed funeral-card shared the walls with them. As for the little round deal table, it wore a cloth of faded red damask, but rather to save its whiteness than to masquerade in finery. By the window stood a dresser; in the window-seat, plants. There was a spacious hearth beneath the bread-flake. The door had a latch.

A house is dearer when one pair of hands has done almost all the work of it for half a century; when a family has grown up in it and gone; when the lost head of the house will not come back to it.

And yet—perhaps it was only his mother Louis loved, not the house at all. Hers was one of those comfortable strong faces that age beautifies. He loved the subtle pursings about her mouth, and the wrinkles

which made her spectacled eyes look kinder. She wore a black lace cap. Beneath the frill of it one saw a little of the smooth brown hair, which hardly a trace of grey had touched at seventy. Her voice was gentle, with a sweet fulness, rare in the voices of old people.

Since he was fifteen Louis had been her bread-winner, and had made her fire. Nowadays he washed her floors too, a service she talked about with extraordinary pride, seeing he was the mill manager.

Pride of another kind made her refuse a better house with the honourable addition of a servant. Grace Merrall was the only woman well known to her who had such help; which, justifiable in her case for Stephen's sake, would have seemed to herself as great a piece of affectation as to be dressed by a maid.

"Nay, nay!" she said excitedly, all her modesty taking alarm, when Louis pressed her. "Nay, I cannot do wi' a strange lass, Louis. I'll think about resting when thou brings home a wife."

That was the natural way. And be sure that she desired nothing so much in life, or so secretly, as to see her youngest lad and best make a match with Joyce Merrall.

Joyce had come to her for the size of the slippers.

Evenings at home were not a new thing with him, although Mrs. Knight went to bed so early that he could sit with Stephen after bidding her good-night. But

Stephen, for his part, divined the mood which multiplied them. Hence perhaps a certain express invitation, that Louis should bring his mother across for an evening's music. Certainly Stephen believed that he, and nobody else, arranged this entertainment. But, the slippers being finished—worked and soled, and there in the bedroom for Mrs. Knight to see when she took her things off—there may be some doubt of that. Men are a little dull to the art of pleasantly-planned surprises.

Louis wondered at her readiness to go. The hills were so trying that she rarely went out now except to chapel; but this invitation pleased her, no less than him. She seemed younger than he had feared. Coming home she carried a parcel which Joyce had given her at the door, and she would not let him handle it.

"Be quiet" she said. "Thou wants to know what's in it, I can see."

While he hung his coat up she laid the slippers upon the hearth and got to her rocking-chair, a little flushed. Her hands rustled the paper though she tried to hold them still.

He seemed very slow to see; but what a face he had when he did see! First surprise, and then delight.

"Well?" she said, as he grew sober. "Thou says nought. Will-ta-n't try 'em on?"

He took the slippers up and looked at them. He thought a fearful deal of Joyce's love-gift, she could tell. He turned them over in his hands, and looked at the work in them, as if they were something strange and precious.

"Nay, Louis," she had to say at last, "niver look white. Thou'll mak' me think they are-not welcome."

"Welcome!" he said. "Don't, mother. . . . But I can never put them on my feet."

So he laid them down on the table, smiled, took up one of them, looked at it again, set it down away from the other—and went and leaned with an arm against the mantelshelf, masking his face.

She knew what that must mean. The paper slipped from her knee as she watched him through her spectacles. Then she got upon her feet, and laid a shaking hand on his shoulder.

"Louis," she said, unsteadily, "thou munnot tak't to heart."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE CLOD ASSERTS HIMSELF

ABOUT this time a small accident of events, a mischievous trick of blind coincidence or something wiser—who shall say?—had opened Joyce's eyes a little wider to the character of the Clod.

George brought home with him from Leeds a normal state of mind and a friend of sporting proclivities. He had "fallen very far from grace" in a fortnight. To state his own view, he was showing a little spirit. He thought himself badly treated; and the agreeable plunge into former dissipations gave him courage to act in that conviction.

The friend in question, a Mr. Prince Varley, was ten years his senior, and must be accorded any credit that belongs to a bad man when he saves another from playing the hypocrite. He saved the Clod at unawares. The visit was of his own proposing, and he did not know what figure George had cut of late so strangely.

Mr. Varley was made very much at home. It is to be feared that George's admiration for him went too cheap, great as it was and much as it governed the

style in which he played the host. To entertain this man-about-town, a dull and flashy person, he let his aspirations go with his painful piety, his ill-requited love with his business habits. The sacrifice had to be made. It cost his ductile amiability much more uneasiness than may be thought, as well as more than his guest suspected; but when he came to look at it, well, Joyce Merrall was sour grapes! She did not care; anyhow, if she did he would soon find out. Time enough to "do her way" when she came round a bit. In the circumstances, he heard with some relief about his mother's visit to Wake House. It left a door open—and, after all, his Prince was only staying for a week.

Pretender George appeared once more among his followers in the character known to them, but with an air of larger confidence, a certain rakishness befitting the host's part. Aunt Selinah heard of it in due course, and made no allowance for his sense of injury.

Mr. Varley being a gentleman of strong tastes, George arranged for him a dog-fight, a cock-fight, and admission to a Sunday gambling-school. That was "doing him well." But as these entertainments were all of a nature disapproved of by the police, they could be offered with a certain privacy. George felt, moreover, that he owed something to his position, and freely explained the motive with which he patronised them.

He was there for the delectation of his friend, who was presumably there for the satisfaction of a gentlemanly curiosity. Patronage without participation. George put up the stakes, but he was not to be looked upon as a votary.

As for the gambling-school, he did not even promote it. It was an established thing, and the presence of these distinguished amateurs was purely accidental. But it came as a happy after-course, on the last day of Mr. Varley's visit.

Pitch-and-toss for coppers does not rank in itself, perhaps, as a gentlemanly diversion. It yet derives a certain charm from being taboo. Played upon the high moors, it may be thought romantic. It is undoubtedly antique. The word "school," in this connection, has not the common meaning, but is the Anglo-Saxon "scolu," a troop, throng or crowd. Wayfarers on the well-kept moorland road from Ousenup to Hebden, from Yorkshire over the great Backbone into Lancashire, may any Monday trace the perfect trampled circle of the school, if there has been no rain to efface it. Except by rare good luck, that is all they will ever see of it; as rings in grass are all one sees—or nowadays hears—of the ancient fairies. While play goes on there are sentinels, called crows, on all the high ground near, and at a croak the sport is discontinued; at a louder croak the school vanishes among the

heather. The more urgent warning means "Police."

Our virtuosi, out for a stroll where space and air invite one, approached auspiciously, hailed with the gentlest crow of a shy fraternity. The sentinel presently waved an arm to them.

"What's up?" said Mr. Varley.

"It's a school," said George, and then explained the technical term to his townsman.

Mr. Prince Varley desired to see this curious thing. George thought it might be managed that he should. They came in sight of the gang with swinging canes and a glitter from Mr. Varley's scarf-pin, and sundry men reposing sat up or stood by the roadside. Others appeared, a score or so in all. They looked expectant. To George's nod they returned respectful greetings, unanimously—a cordial chorus asking after his health. Half of them had seen the dog and cock fights, the other half were interested. George stopped and spoke familiarly. He is not to be blamed for omitting a conscious condescension, since all those collarless roughs were men of a certain virtue, unfashionable but excellent, which George and his friend might well appreciate. Gamblers and poachers, wearing neither canes nor scarf-pins, furtive, violent, coarse, they yet were men of their word.

"Now then," said George, "we'll double your stakes. . . . Throw up!"

With money one can do so much! They were free of the ring immediately, both trusted and admired. Only a strict accepted Socialism could hinder such successes.

Fate was hard on George—ironical. It showed him to Joyce Merrall in these proud minutes; for the school took courage, and merely left the roadway clear when she with her father was driven by, going to see a sick relative at Heptonstall. He could not well take cover when they were bold; and Joyce, wondering what the crowd might mean, saw him look shy in the midst of it. She saw his companion, too, and felt a little spasm of special dislike for Mr. Varley.

"They're gamblin'," said Ezra briefly—when she asked for an explanation.

It was from Ezra, not from her, that Stephen heard of George's being among them. She was loyal. More than that, she had had a shock.

Gambling, and on a Sunday, and in such company! George appeared to have dropped suddenly into the very slough of wickedness. Was it at all her fault? Ah, miserable! No other charitable way of thinking could offer itself to her simplicity, and she sat shivering and silent.

From this day on, till a drastic turn of affairs released her spirit, Joyce was under a dark obsession which altered her.

Aunt Selinah came with tales of his idleness and frank debauchery; for now, supposing that all was "up," he made no more pretences. "Well, Joyce," she bantered with a horrid cheerfulness, "that young man of yours is going it. There won't be very much left of Peter's patent manures long, or of his money either. George drinks, I hear. They say he's only once been near the works since coming home again. So I trust you're flattered."

"Oh, don't!" she cried. "You seem to be glad, Aunt."

"I'm glad, my dear," Miss Merrall said quietly, "that you've nothing to do with him;" and passed to something else.

Her father said nothing. And here was the dolorous thing in this perplexity: her separation from him;—the two facts that she was unable to think just as he did, and that for the first time something made it impossible to open all her heart to him.

By her own fault, it seemed, but yet in spite of her, she was pushed a little away from this dear father to whom she had vowed her life and wished to yield everything. He was right, she knew quite well; she could never doubt him; but he did not know just what she felt, and it would only distress him anew to be told. The cause of her wan looks, her unrefreshing nights and her listlessness, was simply that she had to think by

herself, and keep silence. She saw George wilfully descending to the everlasting bonfire, in which at Ousenup they still believed, although her father did not. A kind word might save him, and she would have liked to speak it.

Stephen's discerning tenderness almost broke her down sometimes. It implied so much love and sympathy in a way that stunned her with self-reproach. If she could have cried! In her own room she did cry, unhappily aware of having shirked his quiet embraces, or troubled, almost passionately, after accepting them with a double mind.

Why was Louis so distant? The thought of asking him to do something helpful to George beset her frequently.

One day her mother had a letter. Joyce read it with others at breakfast, and, as she realised that the writer was George Marlowe, her voice shook a little.

"Dear Mrs. Merrall," it ran, "my mother and I would be pleased if you could return her visit on Saturday, the 19th, with Mr. Merrall and Joyce. You might come before tea-time if that will suit.—

"Yours respectfully,

"GEORGE MARLOWE."

Her father alone showed no surprise. "Ah," he said. "We must think about that. Go on with the next, dear."

Not considering that Mrs. Marlowe might have inspired or dictated it, she took this note upon reflection to be a sign that George was contrite—craving, possibly, for help and forgiveness! Charity is not so certainly clear-eyed as Humour: her tears distort things. Joyce resolved to say what she thought of it, and her spirits rose. But when her father came in to tea, even as she kissed him he forestalled her.

"I've accepted George Marlowe's invitation for you and myself, Grace," he said. "I thought, dearie, *you'd* feel a little awkward." He drew her to him. "Anyway, he might misconstrue it. Eh?"

She was content; and Louis must have written the acceptance! But, when they returned from Mrs. Marlowe's, it appeared that George had not been there to meet them. The meaning of that was plain to her; and her father was pleased, Joyce could see. But—what was George doing?

The Clod, by dint of asserting himself one way and another, became something of a fixed idea with her, an Old Man of the Sea upon her study of commiseration. What George might be doing, what new snares be entangled in, it gave her perpetual anxiety to think. She bestirred herself to escape the ugly, dunning notion, but too much happened to engage her with it; too much gossip challenged her. And, principally, no one seemed to care.

It was a happy thought of Aunt Selinah's that her niece required a change. She took her down to Brighton for a fortnight, and kept her well amused there.

CHAPTER XXV

A STUDY IN REMORSE

"My dear Louis," said Stephen, "you have only yourself to blame; forgive me if I seem to pick a hole in your admirable course of conduct, which is perfect of its kind, but I think you are faint-hearted. Why in the world else do you leave her so much alone?"

Louis winced at the raillery, but did not answer the question.

"Or is it," the blind man conceded, with a return to his normal manner, "that you love her too well to urge her much? Ah? I'll point out to you, Louis, an obvious little duty of our sex." He joined his fingers. "When the other sex appears to us most admirable, the modest among us have to consider that God made both the sexes. Each has its qualities. One of ours is doggedness, you know."

If Stephen talked gently, he might be expected to show a little of that masculine quality. Louis felt extremely ill at ease. His true reason for holding off could not be avowed to the man concerned. The exhortation continued.

"I think, perhaps, my thick-and-thin mistrust of a certain young man, who shall be nameless in your presence, is founded, mainly, in the fact that he seems to want doggedness. Now, you, if you don't mind my paying a rare compliment—but I won't. You don't just now deserve it."

Still the manager held his tongue.

"The fact is, Louis," said his patron and adoptive father, "I'd like to see this matter settled. It looks me in the face like book debts, prophesying pleasant things but not performing them."

Louis began his evasive defence—after a longish pause. "You haven't mentioned all my reasons," he said steadily. "I do love her too well to force myself upon her. She doesn't want to marry me; you can't mean that I ought to worry her and make her unhappy. She doesn't love *me*——"

"Once more, how do you know that?" The interruption was so happily toned that he could not go on. It offered too sweet a hope magnanimously.

"Did she tell you so?"

"I didn't ask her," he answered, flushing. "She put me off kindly. But if she loved me well enough—Besides, I know by the way she looks at me." At all costs, Louis in his confusion had to beat off this attack.

"Ah," said Stephen, "there I can't contradict you. But I simply don't believe you, Louis; if I know my

daughter's heart, she does love you. In any case, you've certainly a right to try more than once—if you have the courage. I had to ask Grace four times."

"That was different," Louis put in.

"How so?"

"Didn't she . . . feel as I do? . . . I mean, if I weren't your confidential man, I shouldn't have the same opportunities."

"Is that why you make them fewer now-a-days?"

"Yes, it is! Partly."

"I thought so. My dear Louis, as long as you tell me Joyce won't marry you, I shall calmly go on saying that you have yourself to blame. You *don't* know. I contradict you flatly, after all. It's too long since you sounded her; she was surprised then, and you've no right to hold by any answer she gave hastily."

"Not quite hastily," said Louis, and immediately wished the words unspoken.

"How do you mean?" Stephen asked.

He had to tell part of the truth now. "She told me she had made up her mind never to marry."

Stephen divined that he knew the rest of it, from his halting utterance. He was silent. The burden of his blindness never seemed so great as when he considered how it had insensibly put fetters upon the happiness of those dearest to him. Here was Louis in

a conspiracy with his dearest of all; and suddenly he blamed himself.

He had made too much use of her. He saw that if he had left her free like other men's children to live her life apart naturally, hidden the great pleasure he found in sharing her sensations and her sight, all would have now been very well, happy for her, and Louis, and all of them; and the startling strong remorse that overwhelmed him was, perhaps, his first full sense of sufferance. He paled under it, grasping the arms of his chair.

When he spoke at last, it was in a voice of such diminished volume that Louis quaked.

"You are immensely kind to me," he said. "But you might be still kinder, Louis. The trouble is that I'm blind, and don't know how to pretend I'm not. I succeed with extraordinary cunning in making myself a killjoy."

A sharp cry of protest burst from Louis. In all the years he had known him, Stephen had never spoken of his affliction; and the faltering of his splendid courage, the sudden revelation, as it seemed, of an under-world of bitter thoughts, wrung the young man's heart.

"Forgive me," his dear friend continued, quickly and more lightly. "That sounds dismal. What I want to say is, that, for myself, I don't think I have

had the least occasion, Louis, to feel rebellious at what happened to me eighteen years ago. On the contrary. I'm loved, and served, and helped along and coddled, as never man was, I should think. God forgive me! I've been absolutely and supremely happy, at a cost—at what a cruel cost, my dear Louis, you begin to set me pondering."

"Stephen, don't!" cried Louis. "You're all wrong. You can't think so. Do you mean to accuse us all of pretending to love you when we don't? Cost! What cost? If you mean cost in other people's happiness—well, I don't know how to talk to you!"

"Yet you know what I do mean."

Louis could not deny it. He rushed to meet the emergency.

"I know that Joyce and I, Stephen, could never be happier than we have been, never! I don't believe there is a happier house than yours in the world. How you can fancy that your own happiness is bought by the sacrifice of ours, or any one's—I must say it—it isn't like you! I mean that you never spoke before in such a strain. Why do you question our choice, as if it weren't perfectly free?"

"Fiddle!"

Interrupted by this surprising expression in a speech of great earnestness and felicity, Louis was aware of an odd excitement. Time to analyse it would have told

him that he did not speak from his heart—that he was beaten, and knew it.

"Fiddle! I said. Joyce *may* think so, but you—you deceive yourself too generously. And if Joyce thinks it really, the fault is mine, Louis."

He spoke more gravely, and with his habitual self-mastery.

"That is the proof of my egregious egoism all these years. I've accustomed her to feel as if I couldn't get on without her, which is nonsense; and now," he smiled, "you're in league with her to make a monster of me. I refuse, that's all. And I say you might be kinder."

The defence was briskly blown to pieces. "I must try," said Louis, repentant. "But if Joyce would be happier with you, after all?"

"If you had asked her before she went away," Stephen said quizzically, "I think you might have escaped my lecture. Joyce hasn't been at all like herself. I don't mean to say that you'll find it plain sailing. But, you know, faint heart never won fair lady; and I think you may trust me to say the right thing to her on my side. What a pair you are, to be sure!"

"Well," sighed Louis, with a final touch of obstinacy, "it's she who must decide."

"I know. I've a long mistake to undo and atone for."

Stephen's chin sank upon his breast. A glimmering

of his heroic meaning shot into Louis's mind and held him silent, with a sense of reverence and unpayable obligation. There were times when Stephen appeared to him a saint-like man.

"I'm very fond of her, Louis." He spoke with emotion, excusing himself. "Foolish."

"You are the wisest man I know; and the kindest."

"But very blind."

CHAPTER XXVI

WITH SCORPIONS

THE Clod's progress was that of Hogarth's Rake, from bad to worse; and, though he did not go so far, it looked as if Bethesda Chapel should lament the loss of a rich supporter.

He still pursued the primrose path in Mr. Varley's company. Not headlong, but agreeably. They went to Thirsk and Ripon races, and five days afterwards to Beverley; whereupon he was seen in riding breeches and a figured waistcoat, which gave him somewhat the look of a glorified stable-boy. His moderation shows in the fact that he did not run down to Newmarket Heath between those meetings; for at Ripon George won five and twenty pounds. Nor must he be supposed quite reckless of the Patent Compost. There was a Louis Knight at the Marlowe establishment; and there the general opinion was, that, in leaving things to him, George knew which side his bread was buttered on.

But he drank too much, as all regretted. Shrewd enough to take good care of himself when sober, popularity and a free purse were snares to him. He

approximated to Louis's conception of him. Poor Mrs. Marlowe, fond, vain, and feeble-minded, had quietly condoned some rare excesses on Peter's part; but she began to fear that her young hopeful was easily "led."

She still condoned, because she tearfully blamed Joyce Merrall. George blamed Aunt Selinah; others blamed the Moorcock. Only unsympathetic folk blamed George exclusively.

Joyce herself was not of these; and, as fate would have it again, she saw him unfavourably at the moment of her return. He got out of the same late train from Aireley, on to the platform where he had introduced himself; and he had the misfortune to shoulder Aunt Selinah at the ticket-gate. She turned so sharply that Joyce noticed him.

George made an attempt to raise his cap as at other times, and smiled like Abner Dean of Angel's; but it may be that some basilisk effect of Aunt Selinah's look dried up his utterance. Whatever the cause, a greeting meant apologetically seemed wanting in respect, and she made way for him with a crushing affectation of non-recognition. George felt himself at fault. He waited, collecting himself while other passengers came out. So Miss Merrall spoke aside to her charge:

"There's George Marlowe. You mustn't see him, he's tipsy."

Joyce was horrorstruck, and a little frightened.

Nobody with whom she was acquainted had been drunk, and she did not know what sinister change might have come over him. She went very cold. Presently Aunt Selinah gripped her by the wrist, gave up the tickets, and strode out past him.

It seemed to George that he was misunderstood, and he followed the escaping ladies.

"I say! Miss Merrall!"

Twice he called her name. "Scandalous!" she gasped, and tripped upon a stone in the darkness. There were so many people to hear him.

"I want ' speak to you!"

He sounded so resolute that, with a sudden gust of temper, she turned imprudently to bay, still holding fast by Joyce. "This is intolerable!" she remarked for the ears of all and sundry; and half-a-dozen people stopped to watch the encounter.

George came up very steadily, and begged pardon. "I was just goin' to say," he explained, "'t I hope I didn't b-bump against you. Just been down to Aireley."

"Very well," said Aunt Selinah. "Perhaps we may now go on unmolested."

He started. They were leaving him with that rebuke; and, overcome with a sense of helplessness, he called upon Joyce. She heard a bystander speak roughly to him as they hurried away.

Aunt Selinah's comment was, "There! I hope you've had a lesson!" But in what sense she meant it Joyce was not quite sure.

There may be a doubt. If, like the ancients who made their slave-boys drunk, she wished him to serve as a shocking example, he had been neither wholly ridiculous nor revolting. If she meant a lesson in the inconvenience of dubious friendships, he had not very far presumed.

For Joyce, the incident was focussed in poor George's parting cry. It seemed pathetic; which indeed it was, though turns of humour in it escaped her. She had none of that snobbish goodness which takes most care of itself, and passes by upon the other side. Her fault was inexperience; she did not know how little she could do.

She wrote a tiny note before she slept, and rose to post it early, on a chill November morning. It was a perfectly discreet little note:—

"Dear George,—I cannot tell you how sorry I was to-night. You looked unhappy and strange. I think you ought to know that I am sad when I hear of your wild doings, or see them. Don't you wish to please me still? I am sure you cannot wish to make me miserable, as these things do.

"Ever your sincere friend,

"JOYCE MERRALL."

Such a gentle piece of pleading ought to have made some effect, even upon the Clod—but it had the disadvantage of being read with a thick head, and at any rate he was spiteful. That Joyce felt some distress pleased him a little, though it is fair to remember that he had not imagination or sympathy to guess how miserable she might be; and, since the Clod was less unhappy himself than glad to be thought so, much sympathy on her poor part was wasted on him.

She was to waste no more of it. Aunt Selinah found a terrible means of preventing waste of the kind.

For, just now, Stephen was very much at any one's mercy. Struck by the inveteracy of Joyce's interest in a lad who proved his worthlessness, he had had some sleepless nights; and, as usual, they depressed the nice balance of his temperament. He was easily made wakeful, lacking exercise; and the long unoccupied hours were much more wearisome than to a sighted man. Insomnia means some loss of clearness and of will-power.

He needed both. Revolving strange possibilities in the dark, he could not see his way to act for Louis without freeing his darling child to think of the other.

The truth was, that Stephen's discovery of what he deemed a long misconduct of his own destroyed self-confidence. It was too startling and too fresh. At

every attempt to take a strong resolve the want of assurance, and the perplexity of that urgent problem, threw him back upon regrets and self-reproach. He lay quietly beside his sleeping wife and suffered a torment. A strong nature, he had been accustomed to think and act for himself, and he did not at once relieve his harassed mind by consulting with that practical helpmate. She was busy enough at all times with her household cares. Grace knew only that he was out of health and worried; she had, however, begun to be anxious.

"Why don't you take a walk with Joyce?" she suggested. "You always sleep well after walking."

"I must see if I can't train Rags," he said facetiously. "Joyce is useful to you." And he let the days go by.

His sister came in a pure white heat of anger, its cause being that the Brighton trip was time and money wasted.

"What's this I hear about Joyce writing letters?" she demanded. "Stephen, if you have an ounce of authority you'll put your foot down, and stop that child from making a fool of herself before the whole parish. You let me take her away for a holiday, but I mustn't say a word, I suppose. Very well! I hope you're content with your system."

So George had shown somebody the letter. Stephen

was annoyed; but he recalled the contents of it, which Joyce had read to him from a copy, and he answered that Selinah might set her mind at rest. Nobody would think the worse of his girl for such a kind little missive.

Miss Merrall lost her breath. "Then you mean to let this kind of thing go on?" she asked.

Stephen made a movement of impatience or nervousness, a little shifting of one foot on the carpet, and did not reply.

"You're past helping," she said. "I've always thought you were much too soft to be a father, but this would be unbelievable in a penny novel. Turn me out if you like; I shall say my say first. It's your plain and simple duty to forbid that girl to have anything more to do with such an offald wastrel. Grace knows it as well as I do. There isn't a decent house in Ousenup where they talk any other way—for all his light-come riches. I'm ashamed to go about, so now you know. . . . Of course," she sneered severely, "if you haven't made your mind up, and don't like to hurt her feelings, that's another matter, Stephen."

He sighed.

"No," he said. "I don't propose to turn you out, Selinah. But you scarcely help by talking

wildly. I shall not do anything harsh, although I may have been in one respect too 'soft.'"

His wife looked up from her work, wondering what his plan might be.

"However, you wouldn't understand that. I want to say, sister, that I am very grateful to you for Joyce's holiday. You were quicker than I, for once, to see what the matter was. But there is no need to forbid her marrying George Marlowe. She loves her father, Selinah."

"I'm talking about her happiness, not her wedding, and you know it," she answered; looking as if she would like to shake him. "Loves her father! I suppose she does, and that's all that comes of spoiling her. Yes, you've been soft. You don't thank me for holding my tongue, I notice. Suppose you weren't here to coddle her and find her something to do?"

A flush of pain went over the blind man's face. He was silent.

Grace's eyes dilated. "Selinah!" she cried, in rough and breathless tones, "I willn't sit here and let yo' talk like that! Yo've no gradeliness!"

Grasping her work she rose, and faced the astonished spinster.

"Yo'd best go home, afore yo' say another word. This is my house; an' if Stephen doesn't turn yo' out I can do't myself, at need."

"Grace!"

Stephen's bass voice interrupted gravely calm, and calming his wife.

"Yo' bear over much, Stephen," she protested.

Aunt Selinah gasped out, "Well, upon my word!" Like all persons whose tongues run away with them, she could be sometimes bewildered at the effect she made upon a placid listener.

"I think, Selinah," Stephen said, "we'd better not pursue this subject. You and I don't quite understand each other."

"Humph! And I'm not to be thrown out?"

She wrapped her shawl about her.

"Well, I'm going! Don't imagine I expected to be listened to—I've done with you." She sniffed, and repeated at the door, "I've done with you."

But she launched the whole splenetic energy of her irritation in a fight with Joyce. She opened and shut the outer door, but did not go, after all.

CHAPTER XXVII

AUNT SELINAH'S COUP DE GRÂCE

JOYCE'S affectionate concern for her father had now some justification; yet he had taken pains, and did so still, not to let her think herself a cause of his unhappiness.

She heard the note of unconfessed depression in his voice, which had not its ordinary fulness; and she felt it in endearments of which the tenderness was not, as usual, playful. If he had not explained it as an effect of wanting sleep, she would have sharply accused herself. They must have a long walk, he had said.

By this time, Louis's shyness had brought her to the point of owning in her heart that she loved him dearly. She was even engaged upon a kind of castle-building, which came of the thought that it might be possible, after all, to share the time between her father and a husband. That hopeful notion had electrified a Brighton reverie; and it began to look so practicable, and so good, that she had almost avowed it. She was sure it would please her father. She only waited to be assured, as well, that Louis's feeling towards her was unchanged.

In the pleasant, brooding hours when Joyce thought upon what had passed between them, and felt both womanly and humble, apprehensive and vaguely very happy, this way out promised a golden life. She grew eager, and built her castles a little feverishly.

There was to be a house somewhere near her mother's, not a large house, but some dear little cot of a place, easily managed and made pretty—leaving her time, plenty of time every day, to be still with her father when he needed her. She had ideas for its furnishing and decoration. She imagined him come to visit her, sitting in a chair reserved for him alone, while she described all to him. It was chiefly in the joy this imagined pleasure gave her that she designed the interior, seeing it vividly, dreaming the life she would lead quite clearly; and one thought, one big, inconceivable sweet moment, contained such treasure of happiness that she would not look at it. Her heart experienced a great commotion, as though before a shrine.

Was the time indeed to come? Might she so indeed fulfil herself, greatly destined as he had sometimes warned her? Oh, that would please him best of all! Why had she been so blind?

She saw him out of health and downcast, and cherished a happy surprise for him anxiously. But her aunt had first a word to say. Miss Merrall marched from

the living-room into the kitchen, found her alone, and delivered the fierce attack at once.

"There you are! Joyce, I think it's time you knew what you were doing."

Joyce was duly attentive. Her aunt's *brusquerie*, which had always hitherto been softened for her, sounded ominous.

"I took you to Brighton to put George Marlowe out of your head. I didn't say much about him because I thought you had more sense. Here's your father breaking his heart over you, too silly to say a word, and you still go dilly-dallying and writing letters. Perhaps you'd like to know that George shows 'em about; a nice thing for all of us. I really don't know what you think, but if you've no respect for yourself you might show a little more respect for others."

Her niece had gone pale to the lips. "You are mistaken, Aunt," she said quietly.

"Oh, I don't accuse you of throwing yourself away, my dear child! You mean well, I daresay. But I must tell you that it isn't very dutiful conduct in a girl who owes her father all that you owe yours."

She had the grace to check herself; indeed, her sharp face reddened. Joyce gazed with eyes from which very genuine distress and bewilderment looked out.

"Has father said something?" she faltered.

"If he hasn't, that isn't to say that anyone needs to be told in so many words, I'm only his sister, but I can see what troubles him if you can't, child. He's far too kind to you. You must see for yourself the disgrace it is to have a drunken boy bragging about you; everybody talking. I hear of nothing else but your rebellious silly conduct."

Joyce's colour mounted. "I am not rebellious," she replied, "and I'm not ashamed of anything I've done, Aunt."

"You're not ashamed! Not ashamed!" Aunt Selinah looked as if somebody had told her she was no Christian.

"And I don't believe you're right about father. If he thought it disgraceful he would have spoken about it." But she had to fight down her tears.

"And you're not ashamed. Well, I am. And if you care about me as much as you seem to care about that precious young imbecile, you'll try to be a little less of a silly schoolgirl, Joyce. Your father hasn't spoken because he didn't know. I've just had the satisfaction of telling him."

"He *did* know!" flashed Joyce. "I keep nothing from my father. I—I love him, whatever you think."

"Pooh! I'm talking about the letter being shown round. And as for your love, and what you don't believe and do, I say again you're a wretched wilful

Aunt Selinah chafed her hands, and offered up frantic prayers

child! How dare you contradict me?" Aunt Selinah's wiry little curls trembled. "This has been a trouble to your father for months, and you, in particular, owe him more considerate behaviour. Yes, you're old enough to know it—I *will* tell you! You would have heard of it some day, and I never saw any sense in keeping it from you; it was you who made your father blind, when you were a baby!"

Joyce went very white, and her eyes were fixed with incredulous pain, and a kind of horror. She swayed at last; made as if to put her hands out; and then sank down by the table.

The foolish old termagant caught her breath as fear clutched her. "Oh, my heavens, what have I done!" she exclaimed, and hurried round to see. Her dear adorable niece, for whom she would certainly have entered a burning house without hesitation, lay the picture of death there.

With shaking fingers Aunt Selinah tore Joyce's collar off, and loosed her pretty bodice and her corsets; brought water and sprinkled it upon the colourless sweet face, and chafed her hands and offered up frantic prayers. For once in her life she was a coward; she dared not call for help. During a whole minute of extremity, she knew the perfect sensations of an unpremeditated murder; then Joyce's sigh of consciousness brought an hysterical rain of useless tears.

"Oh, my pet! My poor, darling pet! I thought Aunt Selinah had killed you."

But Joyce's first movement put her arms away, silencing endearments. She knelt, still trembling, while her niece endeavoured to rise without help. Joyce sank into a chair and dried her face, shivering. She had still the look of dismay and incredulity; which presently fixed itself upon Aunt Selinah, who shrank and covered her eyes.

"Oh, I can see you'll never forgive me!" cried out the old soul bitterly. "I told you because I loved you, all the same. I did, I did! Don't look at me like that, Joyce, pray!"

Betty heard the last words. She appeared in the doorway, returned from an errand; and, taking in the situation at one wide-eyed glance, she spoke like the *Powerful's* gun at Ladysmith.

"*Now* what hae yo' done?"

In an instant Aunt Selinah scrambled up from her marrow-bones and stood at bay, extremely fierce and haggard.

"Yo' natterin' owd nowght! I declare if iver! What has she been sayin' to yo', Doy?"

But the sight of Joyce's disordered dress, her wet and colourless woeful face, the old maid's contrition, gave Betty a sufficient guess.

"Selinah Merrall," she demanded finally, "hae yo' telled her what she s'ouldn't know?"

"Hold your tongue!" said Aunt Selinah. "How dare you speak to me like that? Leave the kitchen, woman!" which ancient formula sent Betty bounding towards the inner door indeed, but not submissively. She was scarlet.

"I will that!" she exclaimed. "I'll bring them 'at can talk to yo'."

Happily or not, Joyce's frightened cry arrested her: "No, no! Betty! You mustn't!"

Joyce had started up, her hands fluttering at the open bodice; and her eyes implored.

"You are quite wrong, Betty," she said more quietly, the old servant having turned to look at her. "You don't understand. This is between ourselves, and I—I think you'd better go upstairs or somewhere."

The guilty old maid was wiping her eyes with little quick movements. For a moment Betty gazed with lips apart, eyeing them both very doubtfully; and then her arms fell slack.

"It's a strange do, I think," she commented, "if yo'r mother munnot know. I wish I'd nut goane out, choose how it be."

A defiant glance at the enemy pointed her regret; and with that, and a certain deliberation of retirement, she left the kitchen. As she did so Aunt Selinah

turned her back upon Joyce, and there were sounds of quieter grief from her.

"Please go on," said the gallant girl. "You must tell me how it happened now."

"Of course it wasn't your fault," came the answer between her sniffs. "You were just a little baby. . . . You dropped a watch, in bed, on one of Stephen's eyes. Oh, Joyce"—she turned about, her thin yellow hands extended in a gesture of appeal—"I was mad, I think; forgive me—forgive me! I take back all I said, every word of it. And—don't tell your father! In pity! If you do—if he knows he'll never let me speak to you again. I'll fasten your bodice."

Joyce began to fasten it herself, however.

"Forgive me!"

"I do forgive you, Aunt," she said. "I'm glad you told me."

Something resolute in the tone of this assurance alarmed the penitent.

"And you—you won't speak of it?" she faltered.

Joyce's calm glance met her frankly. "No. . . . But don't kiss me, Aunt! I'm not quite steady."

She was, in fact, still pale; and her desire to be alone overmastered all other feelings. Aunt Selinah stooped and picked up her shawl, a miserable woman. She put it on so as to hide her face completely.

"I'll go out by the back way," she said; and Joyce heard a sob as the door was shut.

CHAPTER XXVIII

IN THE DARK

THE Prime Minister had won her campaign.

Joyce rallied her courage not to think, and went through the ordeal of bidding her father and mother good-night. Then she climbed to her room. Her heart was beating to a bitter-strong Beethoven-music, sorrowful and mutinous; a distracted, broken symphony which could only play itself out in solitude.

What was it that had stunned her? Something woeful and unalterable, not the crashing discord of the first bar, but a sobbing underphrase with recurrent echoes. She stood in the dark and tried to bring it back.

"I am not sorry," she told herself: not sorry that she owed more amends for fortune's spite to her father, and for his kindness, than she had ever dreamed of making. "I nearly cried when I kissed him. Oh, poor Dad! How cruel it must have been! Cruel! And all this time he has kept it from me." The tears that fell for him were not bitter at all, but sweet to her. They came in a warm shower, and ceased quickly.

It was terrible to have been the cause of such a thing!

Joyce had fainted under the shock of it; and for that, at any rate, she felt sorry helplessly—immensely pitiful—full of dear admiration for his noble and wonderful goodness all her life. Instead of kissing him just now, she could have wept on her knees. She owed him what she could never pay—never! And now, when she knew it—dreadfully the feeling accused her!—she felt as if, somehow, there would never be any gladness in paying what she could pay—as if some part of her heart was dead.

She sat on her bed in a maze of sorrow, unable to think clearly. She had not only wished to be alone: her sensation was, vaguely, as if she were condemned to be alone always.

How was that? She took herself to task almost fiercely. How was it that when she did not know what she owed him it had seemed so easy and so happy, but now it seemed hard, not happy at all? She could not blame herself for letting the watch fall. It was not that. She remembered nothing about it. There was no blame; she was a little baby! The misery seemed to be that nothing she could do would atone for that, and so there was nothing, now, that could give her pleasure.

Why should it seem as if she grudged the little she *could* do, the unavailing little, so out-balanced by his love?

She denied that she grudged it! It was her duty; and she accepted it gladly—oh, gladly! It might be very poor when done; so it would be; but it would be all she could give him, all.

His love was overwhelming; it daunted her. Hers for him, being a duty only, could not equal it. She gave her life; but his love was given freely; he had never done her harm. Something unjust in fate crushed her spirit.

Calm in a kind of stupor, she saw, now, why he would not admit of any sacrifice if he could help it. He had kept the cruel truth from her for this kind reason—that he did not wish her to think a duty bound her. It seemed to Joyce that she had never known what duty meant; she had done all for love. It made a difference as great as night from day. But again she asked, knowing the duty, why need she do it less for love? She loved him more now; she had never known before how dear and strong he was! Her breast went on labouring to rid itself of something which rose in her throat. What felt so dead, so cold?

Ought she to have promised not to tell him?

Yes, that was right. He must have been often pleased, dear, brave old dad, to think she did not know. When he urged her to leave him and marry Louis, he must.

As she thought of Louis, Joyce's mind was blank a

moment; then a tempest shook her. She lay convulsed, stifling the tell-tale sounds of it.

Her grief was hours long, a total abandonment to bitterness, to the full symphony of bereaved love and hope, playing itself out to a sobbing close. What she could not realise by questioning, this heartbreak told her. Thought ceased with the first onset of it; and when it had exhausted her Joyce slept a little. Cold awoke her. She rose and undressed, mechanically, her fingers very clumsy; shed a few tears more as her cheek felt the pillow; and then slumbered deeply, and late.

Betty came to call her at breakfast-time. She stood by the bedside with an uncustomary cup of tea, while Joyce tried to think what her illness was.

"Come, Doy! Rouse up an' sup this," the motherly soul was saying.

Presently she remembered, but without any shock, and raised herself on an elbow to let the tray be placed.

"Theere, now! Eh, but yo're a sad pictur'," said Betty by way of comfort. "Yo'r mother'll be down an' want to knaw what ails yo'; so be sharp, now, an' wesh that face."

"Do I look very bad?"

Betty brought her the hand-mirror. She flushed as she saw herself, and drew the unfastened nightgown over her bosom.

"What will yo' say?"

There was no concealment possible but by an evasion, she felt sure; her puffed eyes would never look right in time; and in evasions Joyce was unpractised.

"Best hev tooithwark," Betty thought. "I niver saw sich a slubbered face! For two pins I'd maul th' owd thing, an' rarely. It's a shame!"

"Don't," said Joyce. "Please don't speak of it again. Aunt Selinah did a great kindness to me, Betty."

The faithful soul disbelieved this, evidently; but at all events Joyce felt no fear of an indiscretion. She had not even formally warned her, yet here was Betty helping to hush the trouble up, whatever trouble it might be.

"Well, ye knaw best!"

She indeed waited, curious for a confidence; but Joyce's eyes affectionately appealed to her. On a sudden she bustled away to her work.

CHAPTER XXIX

STEPHEN COUNTS THE COST OF RENUNCIATION

ONE beautiful hour for Stephen Merrall, long remembered by him, came of his sister's cruel-kind disloyalty.

It bloomed the same evening. He heard his daughter creep softly in to him, and felt her hands upon his shoulders. There was more tenderness than common in her way of kissing him. Then she slipped an arm about his neck, and linked her hands, and put her cheek against his cheek; sitting across his knees as she used to do when her head did not reach his shoulder yet, and when she wondered to hear how his big heart beat. It beat now, certainly, for he thought she had come at last to speak of Louis.

He had even mistaken her approach from the door, which seemed to Stephen either mischievous (for in lighter moods she still played tricks upon him) or shyly happy, promising a confidence.

The first inspiration of her "duty" was easy, and delightful, after all; she had a promise to give, and came with the grace of certainty to please him. She only came quietly because, at the door, the pity

and grateful devotion with which she saw him, sitting there patient, as her mother had just left him, throbbed very full and warm for him. His pallor was deeper than usual: she did not doubt that Aunt Selinah told the truth about his wakefulness at nights, and she was going to do a little good to that, at all events. Neither mischief nor a shy happiness showed in her face, but a beautiful compassion.

"Some news, darling heart?" he asked presently.

"No; nothing. Only that I'm going to be a good girl!"

Her voice for his ear, when low and winning, had an extraordinary charm of sound apart from the words; a thrill from her heart was in it, he thought.

"Dear Dad! You've been dreadfully upset about me; I think I know why you couldn't sleep. Will you be *very* pleased if I don't have anything more to do with George Marlowe?"

How womanly she seemed! She laid her hand upon his heart so surely. He held her close, and could not trust himself at once to speak.

"I won't," she promised. "You're worth a thousand George Marlowes. I want to belong to you every bit, if you'll have me."

Of course she did! His breast was big with the joy of it, while his troublesome eyes ached and smarted. Not now could he begin to put her love away, as he

had to do. Another day for that; it must be done calmly, like a piece of business.

"God bless you, my dear," he said. "I didn't mistrust you."

Another day. She was too preciously God's gift to him just then, too marvellously real and warm in his arms. He felt her cheek too soft against his face, and the touch of her hair upon his forehead, and the sweet and shapely burden of her—pure-hearted, a very holy possession. Somehow she was like a new possession, strange to him. Being about to lose her, he had a misgiving as if she were a life not really known to him, and one that longed to be. He thrilled to her; a queer sense of unreality forced him to take account vividly of all about her. How sweet she was, like a cool fragrance, a visiting incarnation of some rare spirit, with him for the moment only! He dared not speak to her; a word would break the spell.

The ecstacy passed as he listened to her quiet breathing, but left him unspeakably content, with the pride of his purposed renunciation. For her part she was silent because in his arms her bruised heart of overnight found comfort. Virtue went out of him; she drank at his fount of courage, forgetting everything—and he was touched to find her after a while asleep.

Had she been wakeful too?

But he was sure now of being able to bring about her happiness; and he himself, out-wearied, fell asleep immediately. When he awoke she was gone, and her mother's voice greeted him. It was midnight; he had slept five hours.

Refreshed and confident on the morrow, Stephen came back, as it were, to a life in which there was nothing amiss or wanting, and heard a heartiness in all voices, imagined easily the look of any one who spoke to him, belonged again to the busy world. His mill's great hum, a roar when the office door was opened, gave him extraordinary pleasure; and in all unoccupied moments he listened to it, distinguishing the clatter and note of particular machines, occasional voices even, a crescendo and diminuendo as belts were shifted on and off loose pulleys, the whole proud gamut of the factory. One of his clerks came in from the bank with a bag of gold and silver, and the counting out of wages into small tin boxes began around him. To be the nourisher of so many homes made him glad.

He fell into a reverie, wondering how surely all things prospered to which he had ever set his hand; and the reward he presently owed to Louis pleased him—to Louis, who in these days enabled him to look on without anxiety, tasting the satisfaction of a great enterprise brought to the fullest pitch of its activities. Even upon Louis, he had imposed his will a little;

he smiled to remember how. The rest looked easy. Everything comes to him who knows how to wait; even to a man who can't see!

"I shall have news for you in a day or two," he said as Louis bade good-bye till Monday. "And take notice that we won't be left so much alone at Wake House on Sundays."

A little selfish reluctancy to act revealed itself to his mind. It was an effect, perhaps, of confidence, but still more of the quickened sense of happiness when Joyce moved about him.

With her mother, he took note of characteristics they had not spoken of before, or only Grace had spoken of; such as Joyce's art of often beginning to speak about the very subject one had in mind, her foreseeing little things that would be wanted, her cleverness in this and that, and what he called her "quick-heartedness" when a petty trouble occurred. These and the like merits had been Grace's talk for some time past: he understood, now, why. The house, he agreed, would be different without her. That reflection came to himself if he sat alone; and, when she was near, he counted the cost of renouncing her, coin by little coin.

It was not that he grudged it, any more than she did the renunciation of her love. He was not well aware of the counting.

But all his recent study of self-blame had furnished him with details, and so did her added zeal to serve him. He knew just how she had been uniquely of use to him; and just why he loved her. He, too, fell, as she had done, to wondering what would remain to him when she had married Louis; but he knew far better than to hope for much. The decree was, "She shall cleave to her husband," and he found it astonishingly hard to hasten matters.

He dallied just one week, then Betty came and told him what had happened. She alone knew the state of Joyce's mind. She had seen her very forlorn; "whenever her mother was not by, the lass looked pitiful beyond bearing;" and, surprising her at last in tears, Betty had taken counsel with her own heart and gone to her master.

Stephen's devouring anger against his sister burned unspoken. Alarm for the consequence of what she had done—and Joyce's behaviour told him she had done this thing indeed—overwhelmed all feelings else.

He had now a greater task before him.

CHAPTER XXX

A STRONG MAN UNARMED

A CLASH of wills, if anxious and decisive, is wounding in proportion as love seems to justify it. Love disarms while inciting us. Against a stranger's force we wear strong mail, but none against our own household. Stephen's heart was turned to water.

He was aware of two things clearly, besides the fact that his darling had been stabbed.

Her love, too kind already by his own old fault, might seem to her an expiation, a binding and very ardent piety; and so, when she most desired to prove her love, he must be inexorable to refuse such proof.

That was one thing. For himself, it now meant nothing; renunciation did not cost him another pang. But he also saw that she would suffer cruelly, making a resistance which he could not measure. He knew her nature. To yield where she thought it honourable not to yield had been sufficiently hard in one egregious case, just ended. How much harder it might be now, when love was the motive, his own love warned him

sharply; for he had wished to spare her just this ordeal.

Betty's report had plunged him into a tumult of emotions, anger and pity and great dismay; but amidst confusion these clear consequences showed themselves, not orderly indeed, but lit by flashes while the rest was dark. He let them wait and sent for Joyce. Pity was urgent.

"My poor child!" he said as she entered, his arms outstretched at the door for her; and she—unprepared for this, shocked and pierced by the grief of it—leaped to a tragical embrace.

"Father!"

Her sobbing cry gave him the strength he needed, to soothe her lightly.

"There, there!" he said. "You should have come to me, darling. You aren't so guilty as all that." He seemed to speak smilingly, and kissed her. "Dear heart, you had wiped out that little score when you got yourself born to me. What a marvellous person you were! So young, and yet so responsible for your own doings!"

"Ah, don't, Father! It's terrible!" she moaned.

"What is terrible? The youthful depravity, or the cool assurance you came with? I wondered at that, I very well remember. You lay so comfortably on your back and criticised the red curtains. One saw

at once you weren't an ordinary baby, but a young Madame perfectly aware of what you were doing. Come, I want to know about it! I never liked to mention that wicked little affair of the watch, my dear, because it was clearly your place to speak about it first."

As he talked Stephen held her close at his breast, stroking her hair.

"Ah, you know very well we ought to be thankful, Joyce, me for you and you for me as we are! Eh? What friends we've been! You make too much of my lost picture-book. *I* don't miss it. I scarcely remember doing so. I had always you to play with, you know. If you let this worry you I shall begin to be unhappy. . . . It shocked you, didn't it?"

"I think I had been proud of helping you," she answered.

"So you might, dearie," said he, touched by the note of bitterness. "You've been wonderful. When you were little——"

But he had to break this strain, it was clean contrary to what he wished to say to her.

"You may be as proud as ever you like still," he amended. "But why didn't you come to me? To keep it to yourself for a week! You don't really blame yourself, I hope."

She glanced up at him. "You kept it nearly

seventeen years," she said shyly. "No, I didn't blame myself."

"What then?"

"Because you hadn't wanted me to know. You had been so noble about it. Oh, I oughtn't to have known—I oughtn't! I shall never forgive myself for provoking Aunt Selinah to tell me."

"Your Aunt Selinah," said Stephen coldly, clearing away this obstacle, "had no provocation but her own pride and wrong-headedness. It was not her secret, but mine, Joyce, and I should have always kept it."

Instinctively she felt that he wished to put it behind them now; that, once spoken of between them, it was probably not again to be mentioned as long as they both lived. He held her hand, however, as if to make a compact of some kind.

Was he going to speak of Louis? She trembled.

"So I want you to behave just as though you hadn't heard it, as though nothing of the kind had happened, dearie. Let me feel as if I had had my way, not your aunt hers. Will you?"

She hesitated, seeking his precise meaning. "I'll try, Dad," she faltered.

He drew her to him again, and gravely kissed her between the brows. "That's right. And put it out of your mind, because that'll please me. You see, it's

of such a tiny importance! The accident happened—just how it happened doesn't matter at all. I've almost forgotten it. Suppose it had happened to you, you'd never have known how sorry *I* was! We'd have managed, I hope, to make you just as happy as you are now, and will be; and that's what you and all others have done for me, darling heart. Do you see? The secret of life is to accept what comes and make no fuss about it."

From relief she passed to admiration of him and a deep respect. Her upturned face between his hands glowed with it.

"People are not so kind as they think, you see, when they pity one for things that can't be mended. Why, I know a cripple," said Stephen, releasing her and going to his chair, "an immensely clever and proud man, Joyce, who maintains that pity is an insult. Think of that! I can't have you pitying me, and you'd be sure to do it if you blamed yourself."

She said with a burning face, "I believe I was, Father!"

He had to administer a bitter remedy.

"There! And your aunt never imagined it, I'll be bound." He smiled pleasantly. "No, my dear, I don't regret being sightless. I can reckon up far more compensations than losses in it, and you've always been the greatest, without knowing it. So get away

back to what you were doing, dearie, and give Betty a kiss, eh? Aunt Selinah's a little bit eccentric; she doesn't understand us."

But Joyce's first kiss was for him. A load had fallen from her, and he knew it by her unembarrassed impulse. "Dear old Dad, how good you are!" she whispered, and was gone from him immediately.

A profound depression claimed him. He had been plucking out his heart-strings, whether he knew it or not; and the contest, although it looked much easier now, was still before him. He had to divest himself not only of her pity, but, in a measure, of her love even, which what had happened might, if that were possible, have strengthened.

He took now, deliberately, a resolve which must be called heroic.

Persuasions were very well; but Stephen braced himself to something more. He could admit no further occasion of self-reproach in the matter of dependency upon his daughter's sight. She had been as a member of his body; his right hand did not offend him, and he must cut it off.

Next day he took her to lead him out for a last walk together, upon the hills.

CHAPTER XXXI

RENUNCIATION MADE

WHILE her father had been speaking, the words which made unutterable obeisance on her lips were these: "What you are saying is beautiful! Wonderful too; for how do you know so well what to say to me without hurting? You are the most wonderful father in the world; the bravest, kindest, noblest, greatest father than can ever have lived."

And when she had left him, Joyce asked herself, "Why didn't I tell him what I thought? I can never tell him. He makes all look so natural, so like nothing splendid or very good, that thanks would always sound too foolish. He is clever, and puts them from my mind. No joy in serving him! Did I think that? Oh, wicked; wretched! That thought was selfish and shameful: how *could* I think it? . . . I love Louis, yes; but I should be a very contemptible thing if I could not live satisfied, for such a father. I am proud—proud!"

It was with more than ordinary pleasure that she heard him propose the walk. The day was a Sunday in

They went out together into a dazzling snow

December. He consented to wear plenty of wraps—an overcoat, a muffler, a shawl even—and he let her put them on, although, in such small personal matters as dressing, he liked to be independent. They went out together into a dazzling snow fresh fallen, which gave her extreme delight at the thought of so much beauty to be described to him.

Rags barked and capered joyously; the snow made Rags laugh, she declared. But they forgot him.

It was clear gay weather, calm after a storm which had blown great drifts. The girl pushed her hand within the blind man's arm. He appeared very big and strong to her, moving with the upright carriage, and the cap drawn over his eyes, which gave full value to his height; and she refused to own that either the plaid about his shoulders, the muffler under his beard, or her father's permanent pallor, gave him at all the look of an invalid. She in her jacket and Russian cap of sealskin was a gracious figure beside him. They met old Ezra; and the gardener saw how she walked with her beautiful face upturned. He stopped to greet them.

"Ye've a grand day for your walk!" said he. . . . "I like to see yo' togither, rarely."

"Isn't it lovely, Ezra? A shame to be indoors," she glowed; and Stephen said the air felt "clean."

They had been talking about the days when she was

little, and began to describe things to him. After the interruption she was silent. He did not ask her now to do that, but he waited eagerly.

"The snow is clean, too," she said presently. "Can you remember how the sun makes it sparkle? I see tiny diamonds in the road, millions of them."

"Ah! Yes, I remember," he assured her. "That's the best of me; I've a sort of *camera obscura* in my head. You used to be my lens, when first I made it. Now I go on seeing pictures all the time, you know. But tell me."

She looked about her, and they stopped. "The drifting, Dad! Oh, I shall never be able to make you see these shapes. It's fairyland. By this gate, there's a long drift like—a boat turned upside down, only the keel is a great curved feather."

"I know. It streams away, doesn't it, very delicate and bold, along by the wall?"

"Yes, but out from the wall—nearly across the road. We've only a narrow winding trough to go through, between smooth hollowed sides like a gleaming shell, as high as to your waist. It's like the Red Sea must have been when the Israelites passed over. There isn't a speck of snow just where we stand, dear, or through the trough. . . . Oh, but further on, it's deep! I can only see one wall, the other is drifted over."

Stephen listened in the perfect silence, as she paused.

"How it all glitters! I can't see a thing that isn't white, except our yellow bit of road just here. It looks so pure, Dad—I used to think that angels wore snow robes and wings. . . . You're not cold?"

"Quite warm, dearie."

"I don't like to leave this behind; it's so exquisite! Do you see, in your camera, how finely the curved lines are chiselled? The feather's crest turns over. How was it shaped like that without falling, Dad? I'm sure a breath would scatter it." She lowered her voice.

"The snow is wonderful," he said.

"But the wall—you don't, you can't see that! The wall is a fairy grotto made of foam, quite light. You know, it is a rough wall without mortar, and the wind has blown holes through it and made it all a lovely ruffle, with folds and dainty dogs'-ears and delicate little crinkles—oh, rare! Ah! why can't you see it, dear!"

"But I can! I see a perfect white miracle of a wall. There it is, gleaming in the sun like anything—all honey-combed and light as air. I can see the marks of birds' feet on the top of it, three claws and a sprinkle. You don't know what a lens you are."

She laughed happily.

"Oh, but to see how it's all tucked in and cockled!

And then the big scooped wave to the other wall, and all the hills shining!"

"Yes," he said. "We're looking at Cockhill, and they're brightest against the sky; and down below us they're humped, and folded in, and dimpled, with woolly trees and smoking houses here and there. The air is very clear, so I miss nothing. . . . Yes; it must be very beautiful."

Joyce was awed to a silence by the widespread splendour.

"It makes me think," she said, "of the new heavens and the new earth in Revelations, Dad. If it could be always so!"

He smiled. "No spring? No summer? No autumn?"

"Oh, yes!"

"We like each wonder while it is here, don't we? I remember I didn't want you to grow any bigger once. Ah, well! I could wish now, myself—I could forget to be happy, wishing! . . . Let us go on a little further, dearie."

He ceased to match his wits against her eyes, and pleased her by close listening. As every turn of the road brought objects into view she named them, telling him how they looked in the snow; snug farms, hill flanks, plantations, quarries, broken ground, stream courses. He saw completely, for the last time, the wild dale-head he had loved as a boy; the last time

completely, because nobody else with whom he walked had Joyce's vivid touch, her consciousness of what he needed in order to visualise. Others called up half-forgotten pictures; she painted them for him, with quick words, setting his mind free among old bright memories. He could pay her with tales of boyish escapades and accidents and pleasures.

To-day, he talked sometimes with animation, knowing how such tales interested her.

By this stone bridge he saw a ghost once; up in that pasture-field a bull raced him. Here was the hill where he fell with a basket of eggs, and the thrifty old dame came out with a basin and spoon to sympathise. Anne Hepworth, another old dame, lived in The Nook, and always gave him a "thumb-cake." Anne was in heaven, for certain! A little shop stood here by the road, where Tom o' Doad's put hot water in the treacle-bin, and said in a soothing voice, "Theere! That'll run a deal better, willn't it?" In the tumbledown cottage Knotty lived; he began to build a wall by contract, and found it would cost too much to finish it. "How witta do," they asked, "if tha'rt *made* to finish?" and Knotty replied, "I willn't do if I'm made." Next door to him, Jim o' Wild Dave's kept hens in his bedroom. Jim was rather gloomy. They said that, at midsummer, he used to start lamenting: "Eh, dear-a-dear! We s' sooin be hevin' dark weather!" Owd Billy Wasp fished by the

reservoir all day, and every day of the week. There had been rain once, and two men who knew him well were passing. One said slyly, "See yo'! t' watter's risin'. It's gitten up to yon owd stump." "What stump? That's owd Billy, waitin' for a fish!" the other said. "Wha," replied the humorist, "it's allus theere when I go by!"

The teller of such quaint things was not unhappy, you would have said. The sun and his daughter's brightness warmed him well. He had the strong, great heart to forget how much he lacked and how much sacrificed, and so to be glad of life as he might live it.

They had turned; and a quieter mood came over him, a touch of solemnity in the mute renunciation. From the aloofness that his will imposed, he was vaguely aware of something august and splendid; but whether in the happy time, in the silent, wondrous day, or in his fate and the present poise of it, he did not search his spirit at all to know. He felt a great content. And yet one priceless bliss of life, for the last time proved, was passing from him, dwindling; he might have counted his steps. He spoke to Joyce more seldom, and with a rare benignity. Priesthood has no such kindness; the priest in the father is more natural.

Joyce was unspeakably glad. It seemed to her that

no joy in the world would exceed this day's; and, sharing his mood, she too grew silent. The strength in her father's tenderness was like a holiness to her, the tenderness a folding of buoyant wings. She staunched bright tears, and her spirit mounted.

"How sorry I am to be going back!" she said. "If I were a queen, I would make you a great lord, Father. Oh, but for King Edward's palace now, at Windsor, to hold a splendid Court in it and see them all bow down to you! I would make a speech and say, 'This is your King, good people; while he is here I am nobody. He is blind: I may not tell you how he became so, but you should know, I think; that he has not complained of it ever, not even in his thoughts. He is the greatest King in all the earth, and be sure you love him well; for there will never be a King like him, never!'"

His pride in her passionate love burned high.

"You'd teach my courtiers rank flattery and I should promptly abdicate," he said. "What precious nonsense, Joyce! A rhapsody. You must take serious care, my dear; those fairy tales will one day run away with all your wits—and mine, of course."

"I'm not a queen, though," she replied, "and I can only talk. If I could do things, I would do far better than that. . . . I would give you sight again."

"Ah, hush!" said Stephen. "I thought we were to

say no more of that." And presently, to make an end with it, he let himself say something. "There was a really great blind man, once, and after him none of us lesser folk has any room to murmur. (He had *two* daughters, but neither was like you, my dear). Do you know what *he* wrote?

> 'I argue not
> Against Heaven's hand or will, nor bate a jot
> Of heart or hope; but still bear up and steer
> Right onward.'

And, for all that, I doubt if he knew that blindness made him a greater poet. What things he saw in the dark! I dream fine dreams myself; I must begin to tell you. There's my kingdom, Joyce, where I royally do as I please, like Shakespeare's fantastical Duke of Dark Corners; oh, yes, and order daylight things besides. You mustn't grudge me that good land of fantasy because you can't enlarge it!"

"You should have mine to add to it, and be an emperor."

"A despot?"

"A despot, yes, of course! You'd do no wrong. You'd make the whole world sing your praises, dearie."

"Against their wills sometimes, then."

"Oh! The unwise ones?" Joyce caught his meaning, and she flushed.

"Well, make me quite omniscient, please, or I won't be answerable for wilful maids."

"You shouldn't be! I'd leave them free, to suffer and find you out, and serve you sensibly."

But they were now at home. Abruptly the talk ended. She left his arm to undo the garden gate; and Stephen heard the well-known click of it like a pistol cocked.

CHAPTER XXXII

SOLEMN LEAGUE AND COVENANT

THERE was a singularity of Joyce's behaviour which warranted all the tact her father used, and his worst misgivings. From childhood even, she had been prepared for marriage. This special culture seemed of no avail!

Stephen Merrall, being a man who thought for himself, had his pet theory of education. Since education forms the mind for life, it should not omit, he held, to foster an honourable view of the duties of life which marriage consecrates. He went so far as to say that, in this respect, we are blundering in the Dark Ages. A view of love which is barbarous, although we are unaware of it, imposes an incompetent silence in the schools and a false reserve in the home, he declared; and many tragedies result from this convention. He would have had love treated frankly, as the general source of human happiness, the instinctive thing that makes the world go round. It was divine, not shameful. And his very Protestantism took this view. The old preposterous belief that the race is

continued by a sinful means had had, as he supposed, its origin in priestly theory; and it seemed to him odious, as well as mischievous.

He had therefore invested the idea of love and motherhood for Joyce with a splendid sentiment, as he had that of fatherhood for himself. She was to see herself the heritress of a great joy, a beautiful and sacred duty. In spite of this conception, she imagined a higher duty in daughterhood.

That was why the possible conflict of wills which he foresaw looked formidable. His main argument had failed already. That, too, was why he took his tragical last walk with Joyce before coming to grips with her prepossession. If she resisted sincerely, there could be no more walks, however he might desire her dear companionship. So he burned his boats.

Joyce, indeed, knew all she was foregoing. She chose with open eyes.

Only—there were two gospels, not one; and that of self-sacrifice appealed to her nobility of nature in the case in which she found herself. It seemed to point "the right path." Is then the right path always the thorniest? Not so, dear, wilful maid; or you should marry George Marlowe! And is there no self-sacrifice in love? No great and satisfactory surrender? Have done with notions and admit the truth—the greater love, whichever it be, must conquer you, since you

are tender-hearted; must do so whether you yield or not, accept its happiness or die unmarried. You only do not know, as yet, which love is master.

And, alas for Stephen's tact! it lacked at this hard time some firmness and decision. Louis was there when Joyce and he came in, and Stephen thought it well done to leave her with him: himself too painfully moved to wish for company.

"I'm going to lie down," said he, with a light manner. "Be kind to one another, you two."

He had no guess at Louis's high-strung mood. But his own dropped remark of a week ago, that he might have some news, had quickened hope again too prematurely. "A day or two" had since spun out to eight days, which seemed at least a month or two; and Louis, in dire suspense, was left to find for himself how matters stood. He had not spoken alone with Joyce since their great raid upon the blackberries. The fault was his; he had been at extravagant pains to avoid her; and, after his greeting glance at her face —aglow with pleasure and the sharp air, she was just then more than ever lovely—he did not dare to meet her eyes. He stood by the window talking, with an affectation of lively interest in the outdoor spectacle, while Joyce unfastened her jacket.

She was more at ease, and glad to see him, but yet made nervous by her father's unexpected retirement.

A feeling that the interview was somehow to be grave embarrassed her.

"Have you been far?" Louis asked. "I felt like taking a great walk myself."

"Oh, you should! I am sorry to come in," she cried.

If with her, how gladly! But she did not mean that. He helped her to get the jacket off, and she thanked him, laying it with her cap upon the table. Stephen, he saw, had had no news to tell him.

"Father has enjoyed it tremendously, and so have I."

Then she glanced at him in some hesitation, and his eyes fell. The glance showed her his unhappiness, of which the traces had begun to alter him. His handsome face was dulled, and in the pale light of the waning afternoon looked sombre; while his lost confidence of manner reproached her. She held out her hands in a spontaneous gesture without purpose, and he took them passionately. His eyes were ardent at once; their appeal startled her.

"I've something to tell you, Louis," she faltered; then checked herself. She let him keep one hand and strove for a lighter key to begin upon.

"Oh, I never thanked you for the letter about your slippers! Didn't you really guess, Louis? You watched me so closely, working them; I daren't look up!"

The mingled candour and shyness impassioned him; he pressed her hand to his lips.

"How could I guess?" he said, and turned away. "All that work for me! . . . . The letter—my letter I am ashamed of; it did not say——"

She protested, "It was a dear letter;" and brightly hoped the slippers were warm and comfortable.

"I'm sure they are; but . . . I don't wear them." He faced her smiling, if the smile was obviously forced. "You see," he gravely explained, "I want to keep them. When we're old I shall have them to look at, and remember by."

"But I worked them," said Joyce, distressed, "for this cold weather."

"Do you mind very much?"

She had to smile too; he made so much of them! "I'll make you another pair," she said quickly; "and then . . . you can put them under a glass case, with a blue velvet cord round it."

So they laughed, Louis promising that he would wear them if she pleased; and then she went to the fire to dry her boots. He was aware that his love looked foolish, but the playfulness put them both at ease.

"My mother said something like that, in her quiet way," he confessed.

"Yes? You must take things as they're meant." She glanced aside pleasantly. "You're like me, wishing this afternoon it might be always snow. Father's wiser. He put in a word for the spring and

the other times, and making pleasures welcome while they last; which did me *ever* so much good."

She drew up a chair for herself, and mocked him gaily. "When we're old: how dreadful! . . . Have you been waiting till then to come and see us?"

"I'm afraid I have."

"Ah, I should like to make the best of life!" she said in a tone that pleaded. "This splendid day has taught me that. You know that I like to have your company, Louis. I've missed you."

He flushed with pleasure.

"You're surprised at that? Indeed, I've missed you sadly. I don't know when I was so dull, as after finishing your slippers . . . and you mustn't leave me alone, Louis; I've had trouble!"

She held out a hand again, and he took it.

"You were such a friend that I—I thought I should always have you."

"You've had trouble? Ah, forgive me, Joyce." He had caught her hand to his breast, and now, with a self-forgetfulness and grace that touched her like the first avowal, he dropped upon his knee beside her chair.

"What was your trouble?"

She glowed while her heart profoundly smarted. He looked so true a lover. Very hard seemed the thing she had to say, as hard to her as it must be to him. Her eyes filled, her bosom laboured.

"You must be good to me," she murmured, "because it was I who made father blind."

"You!"

"Yes. I never knew, Louis. When I was just turned twelve months old I did it, somehow."

His arm from the back of her chair came round her shoulder quickly.

"In one way, when Aunt Selinah told me, it made me glad I had refused you, Louis. You see, I should have had to take back my word. And yet I longed so much—I don't know why—I longed to hear you say —to know that it made no difference!"

"A difference? My darling!"

"Yes; but I can't explain the feeling; it seems absurd, doesn't it? . . . Did you tell father you had asked me to marry you?"

"He wished it," Louis answered, paling.

She spoke hurriedly. "Oh, Louis, I'm sometimes afraid of myself! It's so plain, isn't it, that we can't let him be unselfish about it—I mean that I can't. Don't you think so? I do so much want you to stand by me, Louis, and tell me I'm doing right. I know it myself, of course; but with father against me, I— Dear Louis," she looked into his eyes, so near that their breaths mingled, "you love him, I know. Think! If you had done it instead of me!" Her eyes fluttered and fell.

"It isn't easy, dear!" she whispered.

The cry of her love, confessed in that quick exclamation, the appeal to his chivalry, struck upon sad desire like a kiss unlooked-for at the stake.

"How stand by you?" he breathed.

"Help me, Louis—to do what I must. You might tell father we. . . ."

Suddenly Joyce was aware of what a great thing she definitely asked of him; and halted, drawing back confused. There came a dire pause between them.

"Yes, I will stand by you."

He rose from his knees, however; and she rose too.

"If you ask it of me," he firmly said, "it shall be as if there were nothing between us; I mean as if there had been nothing."

"No, no, I don't, I couldn't ask that!" she said quickly, very pale. "But you approve, Louis? It must be as I see it should; you think so, don't you?"

"You must do what your heart tells you, Joyce."

"But you?"

His lip trembled. "I will stand by you."

After a hesitation she said, "Forgive me, Louis, but oh! that's not quite all. Will you . . .? If father speaks to you, will you help me?"

She supplicated with a face of pain.

"I meant that," he replied. "But I can't deny to him that I love you."

"It is *because* you love me!" she said with proud eyes. "You are very noble, Louis, and . . . though I haven't told you,"—her glance was veiled, and the red came back to her beautiful cheeks—"I love you too."

He took her in his arms quietly; very tenderly. "Who would not be satisfied?" he whispered after a silence; yet held her close, so that she felt his stormy breathing. "But can we hold out? . . . Ah! Joyce, you'll not get your way!"

"*Now* I shall," she answered looking up. . . . "May I kiss you, Louis?"

She kissed him on either cheek and on the brow, as she kissed her father; and he, mortally pale, dared no kiss in return.

"Go now," he stammered. "We are agreed. I'm not myself, you see. . . . Leave me now."

"Ah, you are brave!" said Joyce. And she did not dare to look at him; in a moment more she was gone.

Louis threw up his arms with a groan, and sank upon her chair, bitterly sobbing.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE CAMPAIGN OF HEARTS

It was Joyce who gave battle.

Stephen, a little unhinged, lacking the sureness of his old control of her, would have taken time to order his ideas. But her opportunity came after chapel. The snow and a deepening cold kept visitors away, and Louis had gone when tea was over. There, then, in the homely room which happy thoughts and pure affections beautified, this intimate discord widened, making tragedy.

Even as Joyce began to speak, Stephen quailed. She began so abruptly, without the endearments habitual between them, sitting a little removed from him; and she spoke in her mother's presence, confident.

"Father, I should like you to have your mind at ease about Louis and me. I am sure you worry sometimes, though you never say much. Father, Louis thinks as I do."

That was a bolt from the blue. He had quailed, and it stunned him. Grace, who was reading "The Holy

War," laid the book upon her knee and looked at her child in amazement; but it was Grace who spoke first.

"Louis thinks as you do, Joyce!"

"Yes, mother. We talked this afternoon."

Stephen had supposed that he was dealing with a sentiment, not a purpose, much less an active and resolute purpose. Joyce's independent will had gone great lengths, and she utterly surprised him.

More and worse than that, he felt a personal pang. His authority had been gentle, a prerogative never claimed, exquisitely thoughtful of his daughter's pride and sensibility; she struck against it unfeelingly, despitefully, it seemed—and this when his heart was kindest. At painful cost he had surrendered one great thing in her, making himself less dear, willing to count as nothing if need were; and she flouted him, taking all, treating it as nothing worth to him. Her innocence did not soften the blow. For a moment, dear though she was, he suffered the stab of a sharp ingratitude, sharp because she was so dear. It was that, more than the menace to his hopes, which astounded him. Out of doors, a wind had risen again; and the keen sound of it was in his ears like part of what she said, whirling his thoughts in a wintry void where lost cries echoed. His heart stood still.

He heard her mother speaking. "How can you

fashion, Joyce?" his loyal and simpler helpmate said, close at hand. "You know your father's set his heart on seeing you wed."

That moved him tumultuously.

Joyce crimsoned, but he could not see that, or the solicitous look fixed upon his face. She talked on strangely, while he made an effort to seize her meaning—her thought of himself in it.

"We love you, father, and Louis is not selfish. I know you would be glad if we married, but, father, we shall be together almost the same, and we do love each other—dearly—as well as you. . . . So I—I want you to feel sure that we shouldn't ever be content away from you, either of us. You understand, don't you, father? Louis does."

Louis! But to Louis he had given his word. What mischief had she absolutely done? Could Louis have deserted him, and let all hope in love be stifled? He did not understand that.

But was she possibly right? Could she and Louis not be happy?

She said so with entire sincerity, and only that could account for her boldness, or make its unconstraint seem reasonable. Oh, curse indeed of blindness, if it were so!

"Yes," he said, "I partly understand, Joyce."

"Do you, mother?" she asked next; but Grace answered, almost fiercely:

"I understand your *father* willn't be content."

Joyce's heart misgave her. Again she crimsoned, watching him.

"Father knows," she said, "it isn't meant to pay for what I did to him. He talked me out of that. I know, now, that he doesn't need me, really. It's because I don't want to leave you, Father. I couldn't" —her voice trembled—"unless you told me I must; or unless—Is it true, as mother says, that you'll be so much disappointed?"

The distress of her simple question dispelled, once for all, his dark emotion; and the blind man spoke like himself, putting all that easily out of mind.

"If you can make me think," said he, deliberately, "that Louis and you are happiest as you are, of course I must be satisfied."

"Oh, I'm sure of it!" she cried.

"Ah! . . . Let me see. How long has Louis known you love him, dearie?"

Joyce flushed as she told him, suddenly diffident.

"Four hours!" he exclaimed. "You really did tell him? Oh, then I see Time's on my side. Well; I'll find you reasons why your minds may change and save your self-respect, my dear."

"But don't you understand, dear?" she pleaded tremulously. "We see alike; and if I found him changing I—I shouldn't respect *him!* Oh, I want

you to think no more about it, Father! Do you fancy I'm not in earnest when you joke?"

He smiled.

"Father, I give you a promise——" she began.

"Stop!" he held his hand up. "A promise must be taken as well as given, you know; but I refuse it. Let me tell *my* mind now. Because it is fixed as firm as yours, dear; and it was fixed long ago. I leave you free all the same, remember that; neither your mother nor I will force your will, Joyce; only, you're not as free as I meant to make you. No! I'm not talking about that indiscretion of Aunt Selinah's now, or even about your love for me; my own fond self-indulgence is to blame."

He paused, so grave that Joyce grew frightened.

"If this decision of yours and Louis's was taken for love of me, for love pure and simple, then I shan't be hurting you. To be free really, it should have been." He paused again. "If not, I must still tell you. . . My dear, your stupid old Dad has to make a confession—not to you, mind, but to his own conscience. In time past he took an extreme delight in your glad eyes, Joyce. He used them freely. Well, that can't always be. As they say in politics, that was an annexation. You're now grown up, Joyce; I think you're fairly qualified for self-government, eh? So, being benevolent though a despot, I give you freedom

now without a war. That's the English way, you know."

Joyce heard him with a fast-beating heart. "What do you mean, Father?" she asked.

"I mean you're not the little Seychelle Islands, or even a rich possession like India, to be made the most of. You're to consider yourself, say, the daughter State of Australia, very ready to help in time of need, but independent of me."

"I wish," she said, "you wouldn't talk in riddles, Dad," and went over to him quickly, kneeling to take his hands. "You're saying something terrible, aren't you?"

He faltered.

"Not very, darling. All I'm saying is that I can't take a mean advantage of you any longer. I think I put it grandiloquently so as not—to be too much ashamed."

Grace was weeping silently.

"Ashamed? Of using my eyes, was it?"

"No: of tampering with your birthright, Joyce. I was very welcome, I know; but it was wrong, though your kind heart will find excuses easily."

"You won't use my eyes any more, though I killed yours?"

He felt that the surgeon's knife was in his hand.

"You wouldn't compel me, Joyce? This is my poor repentance, you see; *my* way out. If I did so to

please you, I'm afraid you would make me a very mean man; I did take a walk with you to-day. . . . Joyce, darling heart, I leave you free about Louis; you will be fair with me, won't you?"

He laid his hand upon her head lightly, and Joyce broke into passionate tears.

Stephen could say no more to her. He stroked her hair, waiting, while she, poor child, sobbed out on his knees her grief of separation.

It was as bitter as death, perhaps; it lasted long, and left Joyce stupefied. Then the compassionate mother touched her on the shoulder, saying quietly, "There, Doy, kiss your father. He's wanting it, I know."

Joyce sprang to his neck, and the fight was lost and won. She began to know that she was very happy.

"Ah, be comforted," said he when her tears had ceased. "What I was going to say, but we stopped talking—Listen, dearie." He spoke in her ear. "You shall give me eyes again; new eyes."

Almost as a mother laughs when the child is shown her, Joyce laughed on his arm.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE KING HOLDS A COURT

HAPPY Joyce, and soon-to-be-happy Louis! Happy people all of the Merrall household—except that other wilful maid, poor Aunt Selinah. quite shut out from what she cares about most in the world, the great mismanaged question of Joyce's "future."

Happy, simple-hearted people! Why should we now, deliberately, take leave of them? "The friends thou hast, and their adoption tried," said old Polonius—who had much worldly wisdom if no other—"grapple them to thy soul with hooks of steel;" and why not friends in a book? Although we know that all went well with them, being bound to do so, why must we drop the curtain, turn the pleasant lights down, and go home? They are not puppets, yet the show is ended.

Ring up again! Some scenes may still be shown.

And first a large one. Christmas Eve in the warehouse, and such a roar of merriment as Yorkshire voices make. An incredibly large dinner, cooked on fifty hearths at least, though Stephen is the host, has just been eaten heartily at six long trestled tables; a

perfect miracle of organisation and good appetite, Louis being *major domo*. To Joyce and her mother belongs the praise of the decorations. These make of white-washed walls a hospitable palace, a place of utterly bewildering brightness and good will—such is the wealth of holly and gay devices, red cloth greetings, banners and coloured lights and other bravery. The bazaar, they are saying, was nought to it. Why, it has cost pounds and pounds, never speak of the work there's in it. Now, this is a fair old Christmas, no stint, all merry together, all doing a bit towards it; and Black Dyke Band playing—nay, it caps all!

See yo', they're coming on 't platform—Hooray—ay—ay! Give it bell tinker! Let 'em hear on 't! Hay-ay-ay-ay!—and the tables dancing; Stephen Merrall's a right man-king. Louder, chaps! He's blind, but he can hear well, and t' floor'll stand it.

Why, they'll never stop! Look how pleased he is. Eh, God bless him!

One for Grace Merrall now. Another! Stephen' wife's a rare sort, wherever you pick. She's blushing like a young un!

One for Joyce! cry the women, the decorators. Joyce makes a shy little bow as the cheers resound, and looks at Louis. But Louis is quite silly, cheering there as if he led them; and he should be cheered if any one, not she!

A good one for Louis Knight! Hooy, lad! It roars out. Hear you; there's beef and pudding i' that! He's wielded this grand dinner well.

And so, with a mighty drumming of feet that gathers all in one strong music, the pæan ends reluctantly, diminuendo. And all sit down but Stephen Merrall.

There stands the blind King of Ousenup, the music-maker; calm, great-hearted. His easy voice falls mellow and broadly cheerful on the silence. "Neighbours and our good friends! A man being known by the company he keeps, I think so well of myself, for one, that—your cheering hardly bettered it. I was already as glad to be among you as a man could be, I thought. But then you cheered very gloriously those who are dearest to me; and then I knew what you felt and feel, and bowed my spirit, and thanked God for your good will to them and to me.

"There is only one good thing, and that is adding to other folks' happiness. That, of course, makes our Christmases. Here you are all about me, my own gradely folk whose work I know, every man, woman and proud half-timer of you—and what can I say? If you are all so happy, and like well to tell us of it, be sure we are far more so, having put you in that humour. 'Out of the fulness of the heart the mouth speaketh,' and I want, first of all, to wish you a Merry Christmas and a good New Year."

A clamour of answering cries interrupts him.

"Next, I have to tell you something which I think will please you. We're very much one big family, after all; and this mill often seems to me a larger kind of house, with a lot of work doing. But the house is rather too large for my liking; I can't get a word with everybody. It was different in my father's time. My father used to say that he knew what every man was thinking, and what he'd had that day for breakfast. Though times are better now, I sometimes feel as if they made a stranger of me."

The fact is vehemently denied.

"Well, you've banished that feeling, I confess. You are the children and grand-children of my father's weavers, and you know all about us, I daresay, if we don't know quite so much as that about you. So I bade you here to-night to admit you to the family council."

Louis is pale, and so—with a difference, though—is Aunt Selinah, who does not know what is coming and feels acutely miserable. But Joyce glows.

"We intend to make two changes," Stephen says; "and one concerns you closely. . . . I am taking a partner."

Dead silence at this, very trying to Louis's nerves.

"That means giving you a new master, and you may reasonably be anxious. But you will understand that

a man without eyes can only run a big business like ours by depending largely upon others, whom it is impossible to recompense in the ordinary way; and you will sympathise, I believe, with my awkward case. Now, if I brought in an unknown man, you might wonder if the old order——"

Does he hear it? Joyce does. A sibilant whisper from all over the room; they are all pronouncing a name with an "s" in it.

"——you might wonder if the old order were giving place to something new and formidable. I don't intend that. There is one who, for a good many years now, has had a greater interest in the running of my mill than he would let me recognise. He is one of those diffident people who hide their lights under bushels. But he has never spared himself. As it exists now, the business is more of his making than of mine; indeed, I think it must have come to an end without him. You all know him, I don't even need to name him; you've seen him daily at my right hand; and I ask you——"

That surprising burst of applause, unprompted and swelling to a note of real enthusiasm, is a revelation of Louis's popularity great enough to turn young folks' heads.

How radiant Joyce's eyes are! And in all that audience only Aunt Selinah sits displeased; at the

back of her mind even she, poor soul, chagrined as she must be, knows there is nothing for it but acquiescence, and so she smiles a pale grimace. Her aigret-beaded bonnet trembles. "Oh, Stephen," you might hear her groan if thoughts were audible, "I'm here, no doubt, for the look of things, and it might have been worse; but well I know why you didn't choose to warn me!"

"Ah," says Stephen, smiling. "I need make no appeal, I hear. We're all very much of one mind. And that brings me to my second piece of news easily, and more than ever proudly. It is chiefly for the wives and daughters, who take a particular interest, I believe, in news of this kind. I have found a son-in-law as well as a partner."

Rather a shock, Miss Merrall; but unavoidable.

And what do you say to that shrill clapping of hands, which lasts so long, and ends in a feminine babel? You did not lead there, hadn't a ghost of a notion opinion shaped itself that way. . . . But you are looking at Joyce, and—yes, she glances an eloquent appeal.

Those furtive tears become you, contrite lady, and not a soul will find them amiss! Grace, too, is plying her handkerchief. But Grace is all smiles; and so is Joyce, and red and pale by turns; and Louis is pale no longer, but a generous high colour; and suddenly old Ezra stands at one corner of the platform, stentoriously

shouting, "Three cheers for t' Bride and Bridegroom! Hip-'ip-'ooray! Hooray! Hooray!"

Which cheers are immensely hearty, and no worse at all for being premature. Betty claps the old man on the back as he sits down.

Oh, yes, it is a rare Christmas! There has never been one like it in Ousenup.

Then Stephen calls on Louis, partner, son-in-law, and popular *major domo* aforesaid; and Louis says he hasn't got a speech ready for the wedding breakfast, and begins upon one prepared for the real occasion—but modestly breaks down. What he says besides, under the desperate necessity of saying something, neither he nor any one else can well remember afterwards, except one thing; so how should I record it all? But he is clapped for his good intentions, and does convey his actual meaning; which is that he is the happiest, the most preposterously lucky, and by far the most grateful, responsible, and flabbergasted young man in England, if they will kindly excuse him.

"My wife that is to be," he says, however—very deliberate as to this—"I shall owe to a special and great unselfishness, which I must be allowed to speak about because—because I am now on my legs and can say what I like. Some of you have parted with daughters, one or two I know with only daughters. I'm afraid we marrying men are apt to take possession

as a matter of course when given leave. But can you realise, any of you, what this surrender means in the case of—of our dear employer and friend, Stephen Merrall? I, at all events, know that he is giving up, magnanimously, one whose delight it was to help his blindness, and make him continually forget it."

Ah, Joyce, dear child! It is your turn now to cry a little; but, after all, they are happy tears.

"He will have it so; and when Stephen Merrall makes his mind up, you know we have to bend. He has taken you into the family secrets, so I tell you that one, for her and for myself; and I don't mind owning, as some of you smiled, that I was never so glad to bend in all my life!"

"And now," says Stephen, when they have all got over this confession, "we'll have the tables moved, please, and make a floor for dancing."

The rest of this you may imagine, save one scene—Joyce goes instantly to Aunt Selinah and kisses her. Aunt Selinah makes, as she would say, a fool of herself, and is presently led, rather tremulous, into the group of personal friends by whom Stephen and Louis have been at once surrounded. She gets a word in his ear.

"Well, Stephen, I'm punished."

"Ah, Selinah," says her brother, grasping the wasted arm, "never mind all that. You're forgiven long ago, and to-morrow's Christmas."

"I know," she replies with half a sob. "I was coming to dinner, Stephen."

* * * * *

JOYCE did not lose her father; that fear was foolish; and he has not lost Joyce. He sometimes comes to use her eyes again. She gained a second mother too, to whom, in love, she has given a place at the fireside.

And Joyce has now, in Louis's heart, a kingdom of her own; sits a queen there, and cannot share it. Old Ezra boasts of that. So does Betty. So, with a most surprising "nerve," does Aunt Selinah. But Joyce herself is humble.

A great poet has touched the exquisite note of Joyce's happiness.

"To be a sweetness more desired than Spring,
A bodily beauty more acceptable
Than the wild rose-tree's arch that crowns the fell;
To be an essence more environing
Than wine's drained juice; a music ravishing
More than the passionate pulse of Philomel;
To be all this 'neath one soft bosom's swell,
That is the flower of life:—how strange a thing!"

Joyce at her chamber window muses so, in the sweet house dreamed of ere she clasped her mate. She greets a morn of June at the open casement, too happy

for long sleeping. "Pure from the night and splendid for the day," Joyce "drew her curtains and began the dawn."

The nested birds, in ecstasy, are singing life's fulfilment; and, awed by pleasure of that, she turns for Louis's eyes. It is full light now, with shining hills and a sky of pearl.

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(*From the "Daily Chronicle," Oct.* 17, 1905.)

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